CORONET

The first Nick Maasten thriller

OWEN SELA

The Bearer Plot

Ashraf said, 'I am sorry about your stamps. Were they worth much?'

'De Maerez paid sixty thousand Swiss francs for them.'

'And that is what you have lost? Sixty thousand francs?'

'Isn't that enough?'

Ashraf picked up the documents from the briefcase and held them out in front of me. 'Do you know the total value of these shares?'

'No,' I said. 'I wasn't looking.'

Dael said, 'Those shares are worth a hundred million Swiss francs, over ten million pounds in your currency.'

'And it was all de Maerez's,' I said in amazement.

'It can be ours,' Ashraf said.

for RUTH without whom

The Bearer Plot

Owen Sela

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Prologue

30th October.

THE SHARE CERTIFICATE lay on the desk like a long forgotten invitation to a wake. The uneven typing across its face was stained brown, and in places the ink had run into the paper. The words were framed by once blue curlicues ornate as a Victorian day dream. The paper looked fragile, worn, as if it would crumble at the slightest touch. The certificate entitled the bearer to 333 shares in Odessa Anstalt and on the bottom left hand corner was a dried wax seal, like an old man's blood. There was a pink ribbon attached to the wax and this too had faded. The ribbon was punctured with brown ringed holes where it had been nibbled by termites. Underneath the seal, sprawling spikily across the paper was his father's signature. The ink with which it had been written had turned brown.

Rudi Legermann looked up slowly from the signature into the face of the man seated alongside him.

"Turn it over," Stofel said. "Go on. Turn it over."

Rudi did so. Stamped across the back of the certificate in indelible ink was one word: DUPLIKAT.

"It is for authentication," Stofel explained. "If any of the Shareholders attend the meeting, they must produce their share certificate. We check their certificates against this."

"I've never seen one of these before," Rudi said.

Stofel smiled and looked at his watch. "It's quarter past," he said. "Let us begin the meeting. Read the reports."

Rudi looked embarrassed. "Must I?" He looked along the length of the boardroom table. "There's only us."

"The meeting has been called. We must proceed with the formalities."

Rudi looked at the sheaf of papers in front of him. "Is it in order to have a drink first?"

He carried a large Scotch back to his chair.

"Begin," Stofel said.

The boardroom was on the fifth floor of the building, overlooking a huddle of snow covered pointed roofs and a gold faced clock. Outside the sky was the colour of stale tonic water and in the distance, beyond the roofs, it blended into the chill sheen of the Zürichsee. The room itself was thin and long, lined with panels of fine oak and sombre oil paintings. A long baize-covered table ran down the centre of the room and spaced along it at regular intervals were heavy Germanic chairs with puffed leather seats and backs studded with brass.

Rudi picked up the topmost sheet of paper. In a flat unemotional voice he read: "Notice convening the Annual General Meeting of the Shareholders of Legermann & Cie, Privat Bankiers."

"You can leave that," Stofel said. "The Meeting is declared open."

Rudi nodded and picked up the next sheet. In the same flat voice he said: "Directors' Report to the Shareholders of Legermann & Cie, Privat Bankiers." He stopped and looked at Stofel. "Must I go on with this?"

Stofel said: "The formalities must be observed."

Rudi drank and started reading again. His voice was thin, almost boyish in the large room. "Your directors have pleasure in representing the accounts for the year and reporting that the year has been a successful one. During the year there has been a greater diversification of investments and though this has resulted naturally in a fall of profits in the current year, your directors believe that next and subsequent years will, as a result of this diversification, show a dramatic increase in the bank's profitability."

As Rudi went on he began to read faster, slurring the words together, like a boy terrified of forgetting a poem he had learnt by rote. "Great expansion in areas hitherto avoided by conventional banks. . . . Tremendous growth of equity holdings. . . . Substantial property holdings in Spain. . . . Creating new milestones in the history of banking. . . . Next year will be both purposeful and aggressive."

Rudi stopped reading and put the paper down. Slowly Stofel began to clap, the noise echoing like pistol shots in the darkened room.

"Stop that," Rudi said. "It's eerie."

Stofel laughed. "The Directors' Report and Accounts are approved," he said. "I think you read that very well. Now let's have a drink."

Stofel fetched himself a glass and poured out two fingers of Scotch.

"What about a toast?" Rudi asked.

"If you like," Stofel said, standing up. "What shall we drink to?"

Rudi stood up and laughed. "I know," he said, and looked down the empty length of the boardroom table. He raised his glass. "To absent friends," he said.

24th November.

THE OLD MAN lay on the bed, aware that his grip on life was as fragile as each fluttery breath he drew. The blinds in the room were drawn, slicing the hot sunshine into horizontal white gashes, spreading indifferently on the bare plaster walls and the few articles of furniture. Outside, the banyan tree rustled heavily in the breeze and the earth smelt rich and festering with heat and flies.

The old man spoke in a voice like washed down gravel: "Have you made the arrangements?"

The man in the room with him was young, twentyish, strongly built with a thatch of sun-bleached blond hair. He was deeply tanned. At the sound of the old man's voice he stepped up to the bed, moving with the coiled shoulder precision of a boxer. He wore a pair of freshly creased brown trousers as if it were part of a uniform. Around his waist was a belt to which was clipped a heavy-looking revolver. His hands as he raised the old man to a sitting position and placed a bowl of soup before him were unutterably gentle.

"The arrangements have been made," he said.

The old man sucked the soup noisily. It was all the sustenance he would have till evening. He needed so little to keep alive the spark of life within him.

"You will fly to Munich," the young man said. "You will be met there. They even have a special car for you. A black Land-Rover with a special compartment to take the wheel-chair."

"They are very good," the old man said.

"I would like to come."

The old man looked fondly into the young man's face. "No," he said. "You are my son. You are the heir to all this."

"Can you not send someone else?"

The old man clasped the younger man's shoulder. His hand was spatulate, thick with knotted veins and distorted joints.

"There is no-one else," the old man said.

Part One

1

I STUCK MY feet on the imitation Hepplewhite table and squinted through the curlicued wrought-iron cemetery gates that had come as part of a job lot. Outside the stall holders were trundling their barrows up the street, splashes of peeling green and orange wood, tattered tarpaulins and glimpses of fruit as squishy as poultice. In a corner of the shop the girl knelt before the electric kettle slurping teaspoons of Nescafé into thick mugs.

Keith darted out from the gloom of Victorian sideboards. "Money," he cried. "Money. That's all you think about. Money!" He flicked his duster angrily at my Pinet suedes. "You're marking that table."

I kept my feet where they were. I had paid for the table and besides it already looked as if it had at some time been used for target practice with smouldering cigarette butts.

"We're going broke," I said. "And I don't like it."

Keith did a half pirouette. "And it's my fault, I suppose! My fault! Tell me who sold the silver cruets? And the Dutch chest? Who made the hundred and a half on the ormolu clock?"

I sighed. "All right, all right," I said pacifically. "You did. But you—"

Keith's voice took on a high pitched mocking tone. "Know the arrangement. You provide the money and I'll run the business. We'll both make a fortune, you said. A bloody fortune." He looked round the shop and said "Ha!"

"We can't buy any more junk," I said. "Not yet."

"So you call this junk." He waved the duster like a pennant. "Junk! You know what, Nicky, you should be selling frozen foods. Birds Eye Peas and Beans, Heinz Diced Carrots and Fishfingers." Keith was one of the original wheatgerm, compost grown lettuce

people. Anything tinned or preserved or frozen or chemically fertilised was anathema.

"We've got to sell more," I growled. "We've got to make the bloody money."

Keith's long finger stabbed at my chamois jeans. "Of course we do," he cried. "To buy soft little leather goods. I suppose all the dolly birds fancy you now in your kinky gear."

"You could buy leather jeans too," I said reaching for a Panatella. "If you didn't spend so much time drinking coffee with old Bumtit Cameos."

Keith jerked upright. "Oh!" he cried. "Oh! Bumtit!"

"Bumtit the Faggot," I said.

"Faggot!" Keith cried. "Oh! Faggot is he. Well I'll tell you, Nicky, he's got more sense than you have and more taste. He appreciates things."

I laughed into Keith's face. "Old things," I said. "Camp things. Worn out bits of art nouveau."

Keith flung the duster at me. "I'm leaving. Now. For good."

I swung my legs off the desk. I had to stop him. Keith was the best junk buyer I knew and despite what my accountant didn't know, the stock he had collected had appreciated by at least thirty per cent.

"Keith!" I called.

He stopped near the urns. "I'm never coming back," he said.

Then the cemetery gates clanged and Patrick Lelup walked in carolling, "Top o'the morning folks, top o'the glorious morning."

* * *

I should have suspected then that something was wrong. It was much too early for Patrick to be awake, still less to have shaved and travelled so many stations north of Cromwell Road.

"The top o'the morning to you," I said glumly. "You're just in time for coffee."

"Sweaty," Keith said from near the urns. "Hairy."

"We'll talk later, Keith," I said firmly.

Keith gave me a pitying smile and flounced through the gates, walking quickly past the overcrowded window towards the High Street.

The girl placed two cups of coffee on the imitation Hepplewhite and Patrick advanced into the shop and rested half a haunch

on a refectory table. The table creaked. I was glad Keith wasn't there to hear it.

"You were just passing by were you?" I asked.

Patrick and I had once been members of Commando 15. We had been together at Kinshasa and other places. There was a bond of common experience between us. That, and I suppose, a sense of shared bloodletting.

"In a manner of speaking, sire, yes." His face crinkled into a smile and he repeated: "In a manner of speaking."

The strange peasant speech style was a game we'd played in Africa. I couldn't remember how it started, but it had something to do with us being the only English-speaking members of the group, with Patrick's mother being Irish, and someone mixing 100 proof Polish spirit with the beer.

"If the truth be told, sire," Patrick said, "I be looking for some advice."

More likely a loan, I thought, and decided to cut my losses at a fiver.

"Good advice, such as a man of your pious learning might be able to give." Patrick went on. He sipped his coffee and looked around the shop. "Nice place you've got here," he said. "Classy."

"It's all right," I said, thinking that if Keith didn't come back it would soon be just another junk shop.

Patrick leaned forward making the refectory table creak. "But then you always were a classy sod, weren't you, Nicholas, m'boy."

I put the Panatella away. It wouldn't be right to be smoking a long thin cigar when you were refusing to lend an old friend more than ten pounds.

"Always had your head screwed on right," Patrick was saying, "Always an eye on the main chance." Suddenly he laughed: "By God, Nicholas, you deserve all this."

I shrugged modestly. I'd put most of my gratuity from 15 Commando into small ventures, like the shop. I had a bit of a strip club, and a half share in a garage. I wasn't in the Paul Getty class, but my money was working for me and it kept me in Pinet shoes and chamois leather jeans.

"Remember Brazzaville," Patrick said. "And the wog sergeant—"

I smiled mechanically. Talking about past good times was the worst sign of all. Patrick must be in really big trouble.

"They were good days," Patrick said. "The best."

I didn't say anything. After all the only reason I'd been in Commando 15 was that I'd run out of fuel over Lammeray Lake. And if you've crash landed a C-47 full of illegal arms and the only way you could get out was operate a radio for a group of mercenaries what the hell would you do.

"What sort of advice would you be wanting?" I enquired, deciding to get it over with quickly.

Patrick hesitated: "Ah," he said. "Advice about these."

He squeezed a small black leather wallet out of his jeans' pocket and placed it on the table. Inside were a series of folded plastic compartments, each just wide enough to take a credit card. The plastic compartments were empty except for the third one from the right.

Here protected by a sheet of tissue-paper, fixed to a backing of white card were two tiny red squares. I tried to keep my finger from trembling as I eased out the card.

"Well, sire?" Patrick asked.

I didn't say anything.

Stamps are crazy things. Fiddly, functional, rarely beautiful and sometimes valuable. They were lovely, lunatic things. I'd collected them since boyhood, attracted first by their colours, then by the romantic sounding placenames. Later on I had begun to specialise and my collection was worth about a thousand quid. I collected airmails.

The stamps Patrick was showing me commemorated the first transatlantic flight. They were overstamped with the words 'First Transatlantic Air Post 1919' and under the heavy black lettering one could decipher a picture of a sailing ship with the words Newfoundland over the top. A few years ago two stamps like these had fetched £4,250 at an auction. These, if they were genuine, would be worth considerably more. And if one knew of a collector who specialised in airmail issues, well £8,000 wasn't too much to ask.

I pulled out the magnifying glass with the cracked lens and looked. I lifted the stamps up on their hinges and looked. I examined them for minute creases, for traces of damage.

And then I began to feel angry. Patrick had no business carrying stamps as rare as this in a wallet meant for credit cards. I looked up from the stamps.

"Nice," I said.

Patrick's smile became quizzical.

"Very nice," I said.

"I would be asking, sire, how much they be worth?"

I frowned and looked dubious. I mean there wasn't any sense in giving anything away.

"It's an overprint," I said. "Not many people are interested in Newfoundland."

"All right. So how much, sire?"

"I'll give you £500 for them," I said, "and that's only because I collect airmails."

Patrick leaned forward and scooped up the stamps.

I reached for the wad of notes Keith kept as mad money. "Cash," I said. "£500 cash," piling it high and blue on the table. Usually the sight of the stuff made them give in.

But not Patrick. He shut his wallet and eased off the refectory table. "That's very sporting of you, squire," he said softly, "truly sporting."

He walked towards the door.

"Give you another £100 for them!" I shouted after him.

He stopped and turned. He was smiling at me. It was the same smile I'd seen the day we had taken Kinshasa.

It had been a hard days fighting. Fifty of us and over four hundred of them, armed with everything from spears to automatic rifles produced by S.A. Belge. By evening we'd moved in from the outskirts and were zeroing in on the town square. The only thing holding us up was this sniper, on the third floor of the administrative building picking off the drivers of the lead jeeps like they were stuffed ducks.

Like everyone else, I lay flat on the ground and hoped like hell he wouldn't get me, the radio equipment, or the petrol tank of the jeep, in that order. I'd been huddling there for God knows how long when suddenly there was one of those large communal sighs, like when a tightrope walker has completed his crossing.

I looked up. Patrick was on the balcony of the administration building, his arms held aloft like a champion boxer. And wriggling in those arms was a surprised, frightened negro. The men by the jeeps burst into ragged cheers as Patrick stepped across the balcony. He had that same wide smile on his face as he leaned over the rail and hurled the nigger onto the street, three stories below.

"I'm asking £3,000 for them," Patrick said.

My mouth went dry. I knew of someone who would pay nearly

twice as much for these stamps. Someone who was mad keen on airmails and rich enough to indulge his passion.

It was only afterwards, when it was too late, that I remembered who had told me about the Marques de Maerez and how everything fitted neatly together. But for the present all I could think of was that if I bought the stamps all I had to do to make £3,000 was to drive to Spain and sell them to the Marques. That morning it appeared as simple as that.

THE AA GAZETTEER gave it one and a half lines. 'De Maerez (Spain) E 204. Church (part 13th century) remains of town walls. Pillory (16th century near Castle de Maerez).'

It was a little bigger than a village and a whole lot smaller than a town. Apart from the pillory and the church it had one hotel, seven bodegas and five cafés. It had ten shops, three streets and a population of 1,500. All round it were vineyards, parched with autumn and orange groves, dappled, clumped together, pressing away from the empty fields and the tang of salt that came in from the East.

The hotel was of the kind designed for Spanish commercial travellers, which meant that it was small, dark and smelt more than usually strongly of olive oil.

There was a large bar on the ground floor looking onto the main street. I ordered half a litre of chilled white wine and phoned the castle. The phone was at the end of the bar and the barman stopped his ruminative body scratching while I spoke. The Marques wasn't there and I promised to call back later.

"They don't like tourists," the barman said sympathetically when I had finished.

I looked him straight in the swarthy, stubbled face: "I'm á friend," I said, "*compadre*".

The barman nodded and filled my glass. The poor have always known it is possible to dream.

* * *

I'd been in the hotel bar for two hours when the girl came in. She stood at the door, hesitating, dark sliding eyes evaluating

Pedro and me. Then she walked loose-hipped across the room and climbed on a stool halfway along the counter.

She was in her early twenties, with dark shoulder-length hair and a skin burned bronze by the sun. She was tall and slim as an arrow shaft. Her legs seemed to go on forever. Her face was long, waif-like with large spread apart eyes and a mouth that was much too wide.

While Pedro put away the guitar on which he had been showing me flamenco chords she took a pack of Pall Mall filters from her brown corduroy jeans.

I leaned forward with my Ronson. The flame whooshed up to the level of my eyebrows. I twisted, slipped off the stool and sat down on the floor. Hard.

I kept sitting there. I was sure my pelvis was permanently damaged. The girl took out a match folder and calmly lit her own cigarette.

"I've been meaning to get that wheel adjusted for months," I said from the floor.

"Do that," she said.

Pedro began to move into the act flashing his Costa del Sol Romeo smile like it was the Guinness sign over Piccadilly Circus. "*Ola Señorita! Puedo ayudarle?*"

She took her time thinking about that.

"I can recommend everything," I said from the floor. "Especially me."

She looked down at me as if she'd like me skewered, with a pepper in my mouth. Speaking fluent Spanish she asked Pedro for fish *tapas* and a *café solo*.

I reached a hand up to the bar counter and pulled myself upright. It wasn't as painful as I'd expected, but you can never tell with back injuries. In a month I could be crippled for life.

"I think I can walk," I said to the girl. "Would you like to take my hand and help me round the room?"

"No," she said.

That wasn't very charitable, I thought. After all it was her cigarette I had been trying to light when I fell off the stool.

"Never mind," I said with what I hoped was a brave, tortured smile. "I'll survive."

"Shame," she said.

I hobbled to the picture window that looked out into the street. The girl had come in a grime-streaked Fiat Abarth. It was parked

right up against my hired Seat, blocking it. The Abarth had French plates and looked as if it had been driven very hard. Beyond the tiny bulbous shadows of the cars, the street was still, torpid in the harsh afternoon sunlight. Nothing moved. It was siesta time.

I wondered if I could sue Ronson for the damage caused to my back by their lighter. I stretched tentatively and decided to risk walking normally. I felt sure that Ronson could successfully defend my claim on the grounds of improper maintenance.

The girl was having a low-voiced conversation with Pedro. As I reached them he was telling her where the nearest gas station was.

"Enjoying your holiday?" I asked.

She whirled as if I'd jabbed a needle into her. Her flailing arm caught the coffee cup and sent it spinning across the bar. "What do you—" Her face was pale under the sunburn, her pupils dilated as if in fear.

"Nothing luv," I said pacifically. "Nothing, I'm just being polite." She forced herself to smile. "You startled me," she said and turned to Pedro. "*Lo siento mucho.*"

Pedro began mopping the counter with a dish rag. "*No se moleste, Señorita.*"

She turned to face me. "My holiday is very pleasant," she said.

"You are staying in de Maerez?"

"Nearby."

"I like your car," I said.

"It's alright."

"Is it as fast as they say it is?"

She shrugged and looked away. "I'm not interested in cars."

I searched around for something bright to say. "I'm not going to sue Ronson," I announced.

No-one took any notice.

She ate quickly, with a kind of controlled excitement. I let my eyes wander over the suede jacket draped loosely round her shoulders and at the round, firm breasts thrusting against the heavy green denim of her shirt. I wondered if she would have dinner with me.

"You live in France?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Yes. Marseilles."

"There's nothing much to do in de Maerez," I said. "Would you—" The phone rang. With a casual flick of the wrist, Pedro

picked it up and said " 'Allo!" His eyes swivelled to me. "Si" he said and held out the receiver. "The Castle," Pedro said in a reverential tone. "The Marques de Maerez himself."

My palms felt like molten grease as I took hold of the receiver. "Maasten here," I said. "Nicholas Maasten."

There was a scrabbling sound at the other end as if the receiver had been dropped. Then a guarded voice said: "de Maerez."

I realised I didn't know how one addressed a Marques. "I would like to see you," I said. "About the Hawkers."

"You are a stamp dealer?"

"Yes," I said. "That's right."

"And you have two Hawkers to sell?"

"That's right. Two genuine Bedouin, mint condition Hawkers."

The line went still.

"I collect airmails too," I said brightly. Then making it sound like an afterthought, "but I couldn't afford these."

The silence was still there, interrupted now by a faint crackling like a badly tuned short wave station. I was beginning to think that de Maerez had left the receiver off the hook when he said: "I'd like to see them. Without obligation."

"Of course," I said. "No obligation at all. It will be my pleasure to show them to you."

"Nine o'clock tonight," de Maerez said. "I will have you collected."

I handed the receiver back to Pedro.

"Everything alright?" he asked.

"Everything's fine," I said and I was right about that. The girl was smiling at me.

She ordered a fresh *café solo* and asked: "You know the Marques de Maerez?"

"We're old friends," I lied. I was thinking that one ate late in Spain. Now if I left the Castle by ten . . .

"Tell me about the Marques."

I shrugged. "There's nothing much to tell," I said. "We're both aristocrats."

"K'nocker."

"What?"

"Braggart."

"It's true! We were in school together. All the best aristocrats are educated in England."

"You aren't old enough."

"Ah," I said, "the wonders of modern surgery and monkey glands."

She left some notes on the counter and got to her feet. Before she left she turned to me and said seriously: "You shouldn't lie."

"Even in a good cause?"

She smiled fleetingly. "Especially then," she said and walked quickly out of the bar.

I watched her climb into the Abarth and reverse quickly out into the street. The harsh bark of the engine reverberated in the still air and I listened to the staccato crescendo as she gunned the car down the street. For someone with little interest in cars she changed gears very well.

Pedro poured me a glass of wine. "Ah!" he sighed, "she was so beautiful!"

I wondered where she was going and why she had been so interested in de Maerez.

"Like a jewelled flute," Pedro said.

"With tits," I said.

"Oh you English! You have no romance!"

"Sure," I agreed. "We've got lust instead." I was wondering why if she came from Marseilles she was driving a car with a Paris registration and why a normal polite question about her holiday should have upset her so much.

"Do you think she's Algerian?" I asked.

Pedro shook his head. He picked up his guitar and began to play a medieval flamenco.

"Where are you going Petanara?
Where are you going Jewish maid?"

The song dated back to the time when Jews were common in Spain. It told of a beautiful Jewess who had brought disaster to her village. At that time I had no idea it was prophetic.

3

I WAS COLLECTED shortly before nine by a surly-looking Spaniard driving a beige-coloured Seat. He let me open the passenger door and climb in all by myself before he took off for the castle with lots of wheel-spin and squeaking tyres.

The journey was mercifully short, but not so short that I didn't notice my driver wore a gun.

"You get many bandits here?" I enquired politely.

The driver turned to the open window and spat. It was barely possible I thought that he didn't understand English and the spitting was merely coincidence.

We flashed past the sun-blackened wooden shaft of the pillory, through gates so wide and high and extravagantly decorated that Keith would have wept with acquisitiveness. We sped into a broad tree-lined drive and dry skidded to a stop under a portico large enough for four double-decker buses.

A long and gracious flight of steps led up to a wide patio. At the top of the steps stood a hunched figure, all garbed in black. The Marquesa, I thought, and went up the steps feeling like a cavalry officer in Potemkin and wearing my very best con-man smile.

The Marquesa, if that was who she was, was quite old, with the sort of face Whistler's mother might have had, beaked nose and chin like the long end of a cucumber. She moved away from my outstretched hand with a clanking that I realised came from the keys attached to her waist. With one wizened hand she beckoned me to follow.

She led me into a high-ceilinged reception room, lined with oil paintings of ancestral de Maerez's, glowing darkly between electric lamps in the shape of Olympic torches. There was a

Renaissance pine cupboard along one wall, with intricate geometrical mouldings on the panels, and a vargueños made of walnut. In the centre of the room grouped round a fireplace were a large sofa, and four armchairs, upholstered in damask. Lined against the walls were upright Spanish chairs with leather back panels. Overhead a chandelier glowed.

The duenna, for that was who she was, motioned me to wait and rustled away clanking softly. I went over and took a close look at the vargueños. The flap was heavily decorated with metal work escutcheons and inlaid with ivory. There was no doubt that it was genuine sixteenth century. I was trying to analyse the Moorish motifs into which the ivory had been arranged when a woman's voice behind me said: "Ah, Mr. Maasten. Do you collect antiques too?"

I turned and took a deep breath and held it. The Marquesa was beautiful. She had come in noiselessly on low-heeled satin slippers and stood there smiling at me like a mischievous Madonna. She was about five feet six inches and looked taller because of the way her black hair had been pulled back high over her head. Her face was a perfect oval and she had large black eyes that sparkled and lips that were rosy and full. Her skin was smooth, coloured a golden olive and her figure was comfortable, not quite hourglass but definitely comfortable.

"Welcome to Castle de Maerez," she said and held out her hand.

I wasn't quite sure what to do with it. To be safe, I leaned forward and kissed it.

The Marquesa said: "I am sorry my husband will be delayed. He had some business to attend to, away from de Maerez."

I smiled. "I understand."

"You will have some sherry?" she asked picking up a brass bell off of a small Louis XIII table.

"Yes, please."

"You have come from London? Did you have a comfortable flight?"

The flight had been like any other. "It was very comfortable," I assured her.

"And you drove down to de Maerez?"

I nodded. "In a hire car."

"It's the best way. I haven't been to London for some years," she said and leaned forward smiling. "Does everyone in London now grow their hair so long?"

"Longer," I said.

"In Spain it is different," she said. She was seated on one of the armchairs opposite me. We were sipping sherry and she had her legs crossed. They were soft and shone in the light from the chandelier.

"In the old days," I said, looking at my sherry for a change, "the Spaniards used to wear their hair long." She laughed pleasantly: "In those days, Mr. Maasten, men were really men. Has London changed much?"

I shrugged. "It's like the Thames, forever old, forever new."

She laughed. "I must remember that. That is very good." She rang the bell for more sherry.

After our glasses had been refilled I asked: "Do you have many bandits here?"

She frowned prettily, "Bandits?"

"The driver who brought me here was carrying a gun."

"Oh," she said, then: "In a poor country one must protect what one has."

The Marques arrived a few minutes later. He wasn't at all what I'd expected him to be. I'd had a vague idea of someone looking like an updated version of the Grandee you see on some cigar packets. Actually I wasn't expecting shoulder-length black hair or frilled collars, but dark eyes certainly, and an aristocratic nose, even perhaps a pointed triangular beard.

The Marques de Maerez had none of these attributes. He was short and compactly built, with a square, rugged-looking face whose skin was ruddy rather than tanned. His hair had once been blond and his eyes were a steely grey and I felt disconcerted that the Marques was neither young nor even Spanish. He came up to me with a stiff-legged gait and took my hand in both of his.

"Mr. Maasten," he said, "I apologise. Business takes a little longer sometimes."

The brown tiger's eye ring on his right hand cut into mine. I became aware that I was staring at him.

"It's quite all right," I said quickly. "It's been no inconvenience at all."

The Marquesa came up to him holding out a glass of sherry.

"Did it go well with Ramirez?" she asked softly. There was concern in her eyes and affection.

"No," the Marques said. He drank quickly. "That old fool is lending him the money." The grey eyes went as hard as flint. "I will have to go to Zürich tomorrow."

The Marquesa nodded. "I will have everything prepared," she said.

The Marques kissed her lightly on the cheek. "I will see you at dinner, my dear," he said. "Now, Mr. Maasten and I have some business to discuss."

She turned to me: "Goodnight, Mr. Maasten," she said. "It has been a pleasure meeting you."

I took her hand and kissed it. It seemed to be the only thing to do.

* * *

De Maerez poured out two more glasses of sherry and handed one to me.

"Ramirez," I said meditatively. "The name sounds familiar."

"It is not an uncommon name," de Maerez said. "This particular specimen develops property. Half the high rise buildings along the coast have been erected by him. They are terrible structures. They disfigure the whole countryside."

"I couldn't agree more," I said.

He looked sharply at me. "The only satisfying thing is that Ramirez hasn't been able to do much selling. He's going bankrupt."

I nodded sympathetically. I knew all about not doing much selling.

"Would you like to see the stamps?" I asked.

"Yes," de Maerez said. "Later."

The pale grey eyes raked me like laser beams. "Who told you about my hobby?"

There was a savage impersonality about those eyes, which reminded me of naked light bulbs and interrogation rooms. I laughed nervously.

"Friends, you see, contacts. Sources of information."

De Maerez edged closer to me. "Just between us," he said quietly, "if you do not begin to tell me the truth in the next five seconds, I will have you thrown out on the back of your neck." He smiled thinly. "As you English say."

I thought of the chauffeur with the gun and the long flight of

steps. In any case there was more at stake than the fate of my neck.

"It was the auction," I said. "Fifteen months ago. There was an airmail collection for sale. It went for £70,000 but not to you."

De Maerez gave me a rat trap smile. "And the source of this information?"

"A friend. A girlfriend."

He kept staring at me. Hell, I thought, I hadn't seen Arabella since she'd walked out on me four weeks ago. I also thought there was £3,000 at stake and Arabella would understand. She'd always thought I was a greedy little bastard.

"Arabella Jones," I said. "She works at these places. Sometimes."

"And you. You're not a proper dealer?"

"No," I said. "Actually I own an antique shop." That sounded respectable. He wouldn't conceivably be interested in the strip club or the garage. "But I collect stamps. And I got these cheap."

"Are you sure they are genuine?"

"Yes," I said. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

I was glad he didn't ask if they were stolen.

* * *

After that everything proceeded smoothly. De Maerez examined the stamps and pronounced himself satisfied. We haggled about the price and ultimately agreed on a million pesetas, nearly £6,000.

"Now," de Maerez said, looking up from the stamps lying on the sofa beside him. "How would you like to be paid? Dollars? Swiss francs? Sterling?"

"Swiss francs," I said.

He gave me one of those stainless steel smiles: "Very wise." He reached into a drawer and said, "I will give you a cheque drawn on my bankers in Switzerland."

I hesitated. Warning bells began jangling in my head like fire alarms on Guy Fawkes night. There is strict exchange control in Spain and residents are not normally permitted to have banking accounts outside the country, especially in places like Switzerland where bank secrecy is inviolable.

"I'd rather have the cash," I said. "If you don't mind."

The Marques looked up from the contemplation of his acquisition. "It is illegal," he said with a trace of annoyance, "to take pesetas out of Spain."

I made to reach for the stamps. "In that case," I said, "why don't I stay here in de Maerez until you return from Switzerland, and you can bring back the money in Swiss francs with you."

De Maerez moved his body between me and the stamps. "And how do you explain taking 60,000 Swiss francs out of Spain?" he demanded. It looked like an impasse.

"I have an idea," de Maerez said. He pulled out a white-leafed cheque book embossed with the name of a private bank, Legermann & Cie in Zürich. "I will keep the stamps. In exchange I will give you a cheque for the full value. Tomorrow we will drive to Zürich together. We will be together until the cheque has been cashed."

"Could we fly?" I asked. "It's quicker."

"I hope to be back in a few days," de Maerez said.

I shrugged.

I didn't think de Maerez's idea was any better than mine, but I agreed. After all there was an exhibition of the Burrous collection in Zürich and I'd already seen the sixteenth-century pillory.

4

EVEN DESPITE WHAT happened afterwards, I'll still say it. The Marques de Maerez was a lousy driver.

He had the road manners of a freaked out butcher coupled with the mechanical delicacy of a souped up trip hammer. His favourite trick was to pull out from a line of traffic, headlamps blazing, horns shrieking, foot hard down on the accelerator forcing oncoming vehicles to swerve or brake hard as he dived into an impossible gap.

"Idiots," he would mutter after each such manoeuvre. "Imbeciles!"

De Maerez also had an idiosyncratic choice of route. From time to time he would swoop off the main roads onto undulating unclassifieds that sometimes were little more than dirt tracks. He would hurl the big Mercedes fearlessly over the ruts, sliding and swaying, broadsiding round the corners. Once we bounced through a ditch to avoid a grinding Scammel. It wasn't the only time I was glad that Mercedes had put such fine engineering into this car and spent so much on accident research.

"Flying," de Maerez said, "is dangerous. You have no control. The pilot could be mad or drunk or anything. And you are 30,000 feet from the ground."

In time, I thought, they'd build a Mercedes with an ejector seat. De Maerez was whipping the Merc up to one hundred and sixty kilometres an hour along a short straight with a blind corner at the end.

"Control," de Maerez said, "that is the important thing. Personal control. It is the only way to survive."

I closed my eyes and fondled the Saint Christopher medallion

on the glove compartment. I felt I needed all the luck that was going.

* * *

It happened some three hours after we'd left de Maerez. We were on another of the Marques' diversions after trumpeting past a convoy of slower cars, swerving to avoid an onrushing fish lorry and forcing a tiny Seat off the road. We were travelling very fast when we hit the dirt road on the far side of the basin.

It was a desolate place. The road coiled around the rock fissures of the basin in long snakelike trails of yellow dust. The dust was everywhere. It lay thick and heavy on the gap-toothed fence palings that separated us from the basin, it smothered the perished grass along the foot of the hill that was the other boundary to the road.

The hill rose from the road in uneven swathes of rock and loose stones. Leathery-leafed laurel and cypress clung tenaciously to the hillside, stringy dried roots clawing through the brittle crust of loose earth to the baked soil below. The basin was devoid of vegetation. Its floor was covered with rock and evil-looking boulders. In some places the alternating heat and cold had cracked the rock floor leaving ugly scars like dried up rivulets. There were no birds there.

We charged along the track, throwing up great clouds of dust, stones showering against the underside of the car. The car bucked and swayed as it hurtled along leaping across the pot-holes. We were coming up for a big right hander, when from my position on the outside of the car I saw the Citroën truck parked round the corner.

"Watch it!" I cried, but de Maerez had seen it too. Setting the car up for the corner he braked violently. The back slewed round. The bonnet whipped towards the railings. The sky blurred as we travelled rapidly sideways. De Maerez twisted the wheel in the direction we wanted to go, and thrust his foot hard down on the accelerator. The car tilted over to my side and I felt a wheel lift. Then we swung round again.

The parked truck rushed up to our offside wing, scudded past, disappeared. The rocks and boulders of the hills swivelled, as de Maerez fought the car straight again.

We lurched round, pointing the right way, still travelling

much too fast. It was then we saw the barrels spread in offset rows across the road. The knot of blue overalled men standing by them disintegrated as we ploughed into the triangular "Road Up" sign planted in the centre of the track.

The car practically stood on its nose as de Maerez braked. A barrel rushed up at us at a frightening speed. De Maerez slalomed the car round it, collected a second barrel with a sickening crunch, rolled a third sky high over the bonnet. The car twisted sideways and we had nearly stopped when we saw something on the hill above us.

De Maerez graunched into gear and gunned the engine. The heavy spinning wheels jerked the car straight. Its squat rear end bounced on the uneven track as if it had been sat upon and for a moment it stood poised, weight thrown back on its rear wheels with the force of its acceleration.

At that moment, over the wild whoofling of its engine and the continuous clatter of stones came the sharp snap of a single rifle shot.

The car whipped sideways. The fence of dusty wooden palings exploded against the bonnet. There was a moment of silence. Through the windscreen I glimpsed a blue and cloudless sky. Then the engine's scream rose to a wild crescendo, the heavy nose dipped and we dived towards the hard unmerciful rock at the bottom of the basin.

* * *

There was a pulse slicing through my head like a razor-edged metronome. With every beat of the pulse came a surging of wetness ejaculating down my face. They got the jeep, I thought, they got it dead centre, a bull's eye. It must have been a mine, I thought, feeling the sun warm on my body, the rock like a hard unyielding stretcher beneath me. Far away there was a buzzing sound. Then I remembered.

I remembered the car ploughing through the fence in a cloud of dust. I remembered the fence palings exploding in sharp yellow slivers. I remembered the bonnet plunging over the edge of the basin, the crunch of metal against rock and I opened my eyes to a bloody haze.

The car lay on its side, squashed, foreshortened, its metal torn like cigarette paper. The roof was flattened, the body grotesquely

twisted. The wheels were compressed against the body, clumps of earth protruding from the tyres, and the bonnet dangled open like a fractured wing. De Maerez was still in the car, his body a strangely contorted white blur, looking like a sack of flour crushed between the steering and the roof. I wondered what the hell had happened to the briefcase.

Blood spurted down my face as I tried to crawl across the rock on arms as limp as cotton wool. Dark fluid oozed from the wreck and the cooling engine ticked unevenly like someone tapping at a single typewriter key. My arms collapsed and I slithered on to my face. The throbbing started again and I heard a deep-throated grunting that was my own tortured breathing.

I had to get to de Maerez, I thought. I had to get the briefcase out of the car. De Maerez's cheque was valueless now and I had to get my stamps back.

My elbow scraped against a jagged rock, and the bloody haze in front of my eyes came and went alternating with blackness. I glimpsed de Maerez's arm protruding through the windscreen, lacerated with circular gashes as if it had been thrust through coiled barbed wire. The tiger's eye ring glinted dully in the sun.

I had to get to the ring, to the briefcase. There was £6,000 there. I had to get the stamps. I forced my body to move across the sunbaked rock.

Suddenly I was looking into a woman's face. A long face, elfin-like, wide mouth, with eyes spread wide apart. I looked into eyes that were dark and serious and concerned. They were marvellous eyes to look into when your brain was being sliced through and your blood was squirting over barren rock.

Then everything went.

Part Two

5

AFTERWARDS, THERE WERE other faces, faces that mingled with the smell of ether and surgical spirit, faces suspended in a rustle of hushed voices and the squeak of rubber-tyred trolleys. These faces were serious, concerned, back lit by circular lamps. Women's faces, framed in white and grey caps, men's faces, clean shaven, scrubbed smooth, peering anxiously from behind thick-lensed spectacles. They appeared with a predictable regularity and I came to know them well, especially the one face that kept to no schedule and came more frequently than the others.

It was a man's face, sad eyed, heavy lidded, the colour of stained pine, with a moustache that drooped like wet string. The face was Juan Manuel Garcia's, the Chief of Police of the district of de Maerez. Although I didn't know that until afterwards.

* * *

Memory came back sluggishly. The drive, the dust, the swaying lurching skidding car, the fence palings exploding against the square gleaming bonnet.

There was wreckage at the bottom of the basin, an arm protruding forth, still and straight as a fence post. A solemn procession of flies coiled round the lacerated arm moving towards the tiger's eye ring gleaming malevolently in the sun.

I remembered the sunbaked rock underneath my body and the blood pulsating warmly across my face. I remembered the blue and merciless sky and the face hovering above mine. "Christ!" I thought, "there was no need to shoot. All I did was to make a pass at her!"

* * *

I'm not sure when it was that they brought the other man in. He too had been in a car accident. A high cloth screen was placed around his bed and that night there was a continuous procession of doctors and nurses through the ward. The man moaned frequently and sometimes he would babble what seemed like a high pitched wailing prayer. We both had a disturbed night.

When they took the screens away I went across to talk to him. We were the only occupants of the ward. It was a dreary cream-painted room on the first floor of the hospital, just large enough for the three beds in it. There were no pictures on the walls and the beds were high and narrow.

The man lay on his back, eyes closed, breathing heavily. His nose had been squashed as flat as a used cigarette pack and it was covered by a thick dressing extending from the bandage around his forehead, like the nose piece from a medieval knight's helmet. His eyes were swollen and blackened and he had lost most of his teeth. His ribs appeared to be tightly strapped and there were ugly gouges in his face and throat. He must have been in a hell of an accident, I thought, or taken a hell of a beating.

"Are you alright?" I asked, before realising that under the circumstances it was a stupid thing to say.

His head lolled round. From somewhere underneath the swelling, slitted eyes looked up at me.

I took out a cigarette, lit it and held it out to him.

He made no move to take it. The broken lips moved. "God be merciful unto us, and bless us. And cause his face to shine upon us."

I froze. The cigarette burned steadily in my motionless hand. He was quite a small man. He seemed to have a lean stringy physique, rather like that of a sprinter. What remained of his face was sharp and pointed, like a jockey who had taken weight off too quickly.

I tried to reconstruct the face under the bandages. A sharper, more prominent nose, more pronounced cheek bones, a pointed chin. I tried to remember what the man I had flown from Stavanger had looked like. I moved right up to the bed and said: "Jacob, Jacob Horowitz?"

The man stopped babbling. The tiny slits in the blackened pouches of flesh fixed themselves on me. Then he turned his head away.

"Nicholas Maasten," I said. "Don't you remember?"

"No," the man breathed.

"Stavanger," I said. "December '69."

The man turned away. It was as if that evening three years ago had never been.

* * *

Three years ago I had been working for a two bit air freight outfit called Air Chartel. Its fleet consisted mainly of superannuated Daks, a converted DC6 and an early 680 series Aero Commander. Air Chartel's offices were anywhere there was someone broke enough or desperate enough to want to use their aircraft. Most times we flew normal cargo, ground nuts from Nigeria, oil drilling machinery into Kuwait, that kind of thing. Other times we flew goods that were slightly different. The sort of cargo that you didn't enter on a plane's manifest. Altogether it made for an exciting kind of life. You were never far away enough from jail or close enough to your next meal.

At the time, like most of the other Air Chartel pilots, I was a part-time employee of the Department. At least part time was what they called it, because they didn't want to stamp our National Insurance Cards. If the truth be known I was a full-time slave of the Department, especially of its Head, a man called Carruthers.

Carruthers was one of those waspish establishment bastards, who managed to be both paranoid and psychopathic at the same time. He had all kinds of knowledge he had no right to, and he could have taken away my flying licence as easily as trimming the fingernails of his left hand. Three years ago my flying licence had been important.

That December I had brought the Aero Commander into England with a full load of seven Japanese business men who had missed a connection from Frankfurt. It was three days before Christmas and there was little chance of my getting another charter until after the holiday. More as a matter of form than anything else I told the Cypriot who acted as Air Chartel's London agent where I could be contacted. Then I decided to find some action for the holiday period.

I was just convincing the girl from Icelandic that the Midland Hotel, Birmingham was the grooviest place to be in at Christmas when Carruthers sent for me. It was urgent. It was more than that. It was immediate.

I saw Carruthers in his office near Bedford Square.

"Nicholas," he said, "I have a job for you."

I stubbed out my cigarette in his tin war department ashtray. Some of the ash spread over the desk. Carruthers frowned. He was a non-smoker.

"Can't do," I said. "I am spending Christmas with my mother." Then I asked: "Why don't you use the R.A.F.? They've got some lovely VC 10s and things."

Carruthers face took on that tight pinched look that indicated that the upper-classes are angry.

"My mother is old," I said quickly, "and poorly. The doctor says this could be her last Christmas." I tried to look mournful.

"Nicholas," Carruthers said, "you know and I know that your mother lives in Holland, that she is in the best of health, and that the last thing she wants in her Christmas stocking is you."

"That's not true," I said, "my mother loves—"

"You will be back tomorrow, Nicholas," Carruthers said firmly. "In plenty of time to pursue your sordid sexual proclivities in the Midland Hotel, Birmingham."

"Oh," I said and resolved that from now on Air Chartel's loose-lipped Cypriot agent would get no more duty-free fags from me. I said: "In any case I can't do anything for you. I've only got the Aero Commander."

Carruthers smiled nastily. "I know," he said. He leaned forward across the green metal desk with the bent over chrome tube legs. "What you have to do is perfectly simple."

Which is not how it was at Stavanger airport the next morning.

The runways were covered in six feet of snow and refrozen slush. Almost as quickly as the snow ploughs cleared a section of the runway, the thick, driving, wet, white mass obliterated it again. A heavy mist hung like a dew-stained lace curtain over the airport buildings and the maintenance hangers. Somewhere above the mist two 727s and a Caravelle were waiting to land.

I turned to my passenger. "We'll be here for some time yet," I said, without enthusiasm. Every hour I spent in Stavanger was a wasted one. But my sense of waste was not so strong that I wanted to take an aircraft up in that weather.

"That is impossible," my passenger said. "We must leave at most in two hours."

I looked through the plate glass window at the arid white waste of the airfield. "It would take a miracle," I said.

My passenger smiled. "We have some experience of miracles," he said, and asking me to remain there, lost himself in the throng of waiting passengers.

The name on his passport was Alfred Cohen and I was supposed to fly him to Cherbourg. He was a small man, with a thin pinched face, and he wore a black duffle-coat, whose hood he kept half raised so that it looked rather like a monk's cowl. On the way to the airport, and afterwards waiting in the superheated lounges, he had been unfailingly courteous and patient. He even quoted the Scriptures at me. The only sign of strain had been the number of cigarettes he had smoked.

After a while my passenger had not returned. The snow eased. The snow ploughs ground out across the tarmac like giant yellow caterpillars. Cohen was still missing when a uniformed official summoned me to one of the administration offices.

A thick-set nordic blond official looked at me seriously. His office was quite warm and he was in his shirt-sleeves, resting big, fleshy, white forearms on his desk.

"We are clearing enough runway for you to take off," he said, "but you will have to leave at once."

I tried to protest.

"There is no time for argument," the official said. "If you want to go you must leave at once. Otherwise the snow will cover the space we have cleared." He gave me a half smile. "You must understand. It is your decision."

I nearly laughed at that. "I know," I said, "we'd better leave now." I was wondering what influence Carruthers had over Norwegian ATC and what he was doing on the side of the Jews. After all *they'd* already had one experience with Judas.

"There's a car to take you to your aircraft," the Norwegian official said. He extended his hand across the desk: "The best of British luck," he said.

I took his hand. That was all I needed.

My passenger was already in the plane reading the *Herald Tribune* as if he was going on a picnic to Blackpool. He looked up as I entered and smiled. "We can leave now?" he asked.

"I hope you aren't short on miracles," I replied, "it's going to take about a dozen to get us up safely."

He quoted from the book of Proverbs. "The horses are prepared against the day of battle," he said, "but safety is of the Lord."

I tried not to think of the three big jets circling somewhere above Stavanger in the mist and hoped the Lord hadn't taken any time off for Christmas.

We landed outside Cherbourg without incident. Alfred Cohen was courteous as ever in his thanks and said we should meet again and if there was anything he could do for me I should let him know. I said we should have dinner at Blooms one day.

"I hope so," he said with a sigh and hurried away to a waiting Peugeot.

When I got back to England I found that cigarettes were not the only thing the Cypriot agent of Air Chartel had been short of. I hoped the girl from Icelandic would turn out to be as frigid as the country she came from.

It was not until after Christmas that I learnt who my passenger really was. His name was Jacob Horowitz, a survivor of Dachau, of the Palestine Mandate and the Arab-Israeli War of '56. He was the head of a strange unconventional organisation called 'Cover 12'. 'Cover 12' had several successful coups to its credit. The capture of Rudolf Wiesner, the Commando raid on Beirut Airport, the seizure of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds worth of Nazi gold hidden in the Italian Alps, and even getting all the data on the SAM missile sites which the Egyptians were then building along the Suez Canal.

There was more sensational news on Christmas Eve. It was then that I discovered I had quite unwittingly helped Jacob Horowitz to steal five gun boats out of Cherbourg Harbour. It was just the sort of action, I reflected, that would ultimately keep Israel out of the Common Market.

* * *

"Jacob," I said, "what happened? You can tell me. I have helped you before."

"Don't . . . know you." The words rasped out in a low, strained whisper that seemed to catch at the back of his throat, the consonants soft as putty in that toothless mouth.

"Jacob! The girl! I've met her. She is with you isn't she?"

For a moment the eyes buried in the swollen slits wandered across my face. "You . . . know . . . nothing." The tiny chest heaved with the effort. "No-one."

"I saw her," I repeated. "In de Maerez."

Thin beads of perspiration stood out on his skin. The face twitched under the bandages and plaster, the throat convulsed. "Innocent . . . swim in the sea . . . sleep in the desert . . . not this . . . not fight dead wars." He paused and took a long breath. His voice quavered as he brought out a full sentence. "Who keepeth his mouth and tongue keepeth his soul from trouble."

I looked down at the shrivelled figure, clinging on to life by a single tenacious thread.

"Innocent," he muttered. "Children . . . no resources."

His bared forearm lay outside the sheet, the vein into which the saline had been fed, thick and blue, covered with a small pink rectangular sticking plaster. Underneath the plaster were more blue markings. I leaned closer and looked. There were numbers tattood on the skin, faded with the passage of time and the futile attempts to erase the scar.

Now his finger touched the tattoo. "It is over," he muttered. "Lived too long . . . for revenge . . ."

"Jacob," I said, "Jacob! Who did this to you?"

The broken face seemed to crumple. "Who else?"

"Who are they, Jacob? What are their names?"

"Who else is there? They will come . . . back."

"Who?"

"Tired . . . very tired . . . death."

"Jacob," I said.

"My soul is weary of my life," he muttered, "but I must go on."

His head sank, the tiny chest under the sheets began to rise and fall regularly. Jacob's mouth dropped open and the air rushed in with a regular wheezing noise.

I was still standing by his bed when there was a measured tread of boots and a hand descended heavily on my shoulder. It belonged to the man in the green uniform of the Guardia Civil. He was wearing his funny tri-cornered hat on his head, but there was no humour in his voice when he said: "Señor Maasten, I must ask you to come with us."

There was a second policeman at the door of the ward. I was in no condition to take on either of them. The grip on my shoulder tightened. Bad luck, I thought, always comes in twos.

6

I WAS TAKEN to the office of Juan Manuel Garcia, Chief of Police of the district of de Maerez.

The office was neat and purposefully sparse, like the man himself. A plain metal desk and steel framed chairs, a row of filing cabinets and on the wall over Garcia's head, a portrait of General Franco. The room was small, the walls painted a pale green and a ceiling fan tiredly swatted away the smell of distemper.

Garcia pulled a writing pad towards him and said expressionlessly: "Full name?"

I told him. We went slowly and deliberately through the old routine. Who was I? What was my age, sex, occupation? I was born where? When? What was my nationality? When had I come to Spain? Why?

The square head raised itself from the pad, the eyes fixed on me like a tired lizard.

"Stamps," Garcia said slowly, "you sell stamps?"

"Yes," I said.

He went on with the questioning, writing down my answers in a neat angular hand, pausing from time to time to turn a page over with a loud snap. How long had I known Marques de Maerez? How well had I known him? Where was I staying? Did I have an international driving licence? A green card? Why wasn't I travelling to Zürich in my own car? Was I a Catholic? A Communist?

He looked disappointed. He put the pen down and offered me a Habanos. When we were both lit he leaned back and said, "Tell me in your own words, what happened."

I wondered whose words I could have used. I inhaled slowly and said: "We skidded."

Garcia looked at me sadly.

"Skidded," I repeated. "We were travelling fast. About 120, 130 kilometres per hour."

"How do you know the speed?" Garcia asked. "Were you looking at the speedometer?"

I hesitated. Policemen were like that. "No. But it felt fast. We were travelling fast."

Garcia tapped his pen against the pad.

"We had been travelling fast ever since we left de Maerez."

Garcia wrote down 130 k.p.h. in big letters and added a question mark. "Then what happened?"

"The road was under repair. There was a sign and barrels across the road."

"The whole road?"

"Most of the road. I remember a workman coming out and waving us down."

"How was the workman dressed?"

"In blue, I think. Blue overalls."

"Would you recognise him again?"

I shook my head. "No," I said, "it all happened too quickly."

"Go on," Garcia said.

"Well, the Marques braked. And the car skidded."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

Garcia eyed me questioningly. "The surface was bad," I said. "Loose earth and uneven rock."

Garcia pushed the packet of Habanos towards me.

"And that's all?" he asked.

I pretended to think. "Yes," I said, "that's all."

Garcia lit his own cigarette and inhaled deeply. "That doesn't explain, Mr. Maasten," he said, "how you came to be lying at the top of the basin when the Marques de Maerez and his car were at the bottom."

I looked at the glowing end of my cigarette. It wasn't, I decided a good moment to ask what had happened to the Marques's briefcase.

At length, I said: "I must have been thrown clear."

Garcia looked at me with disbelief.

"Or crawled up," I said.

Garcia shifted in his chair as the frame was cutting into his haunches. "There was also the call for the ambulance," Garcia

said, "I suppose, you don't remember walking two miles to a village, making a telephone call for an ambulance, then walking back to the scene of the accident and lying down by the side of the road?"

"No," I said.

Garcia said: "I thought you would say that."

"Perhaps it was someone passing by," I said. "A woman perhaps driving on her own." I stopped, remembering the face with the dark serious eyes and the full, wide mouth. I could see it more clearly now. She had shoulder-length black hair and was wearing something brown and military looking.

"Go on," Garcia said.

"A woman, frightened perhaps of blood, yet unwilling to abandon someone. A good Samaritan," I added hopefully, reflecting that I knew all about falling amongst thieves. I hoped the briefcase was safe. Garcia said dryly:

"Tell me why you were travelling with the Marques."

"There was an exhibition of stamps in Zürich."

"Is that all?"

"We were also hoping to do some business. Selling stamps."

Garcia looked at me blankly.

"There were a million pesetas worth of stamps in the Marques's briefcase," I said.

Garcia squeezed another Habanos from the pack. "There was no briefcase," he said.

* * *

I sucked slowly at my cigarette. So there had been an ambush after all, a woman. But why? No-one could have known that de Maerez would be travelling to Zürich with one million pesetas worth of stamps.

"Perhaps it was thrown out of the car."

"There is very little undergrowth at the scene of the accident," Garcia pointed out. "If it had been thrown out, the briefcase would have been found. Will you please describe the briefcase."

"Oh—blue-black leather, steel-framed, with a combination lock. It was a heavy solid-looking thing, I'd say about 50 centimetres by 35 centimetres by 15 centimetres."

Garcia smiled thinly. "You would have made a good policeman," he said, writing it all down.

If no-one had known about the stamps, then there must have been some other reason for ambushing de Maerez. It must have been a very good reason if they were to make such extravagant arrangements, if they were prepared to kill him. Yet, there was something strange. They had called for an ambulance. They had carried me up from the bottom of the basin. I think that was why I did not tell Garcia about the woman. There was also Jacob.

Garcia brought out a buff folder with my name on it. "Now," he said, "you describe yourself as a stamp dealer." He tapped the folder with his pen. "But that is not what it says here. It says here that you were a pilot. You used to fly dubious cargo for a dubious charter company. It says that after three years of doing that you spent six months in Africa fighting as a mercenary. You have an antique shop in London, but you are also interested in a club called 'Les Chic Chick' and a car sales showroom." He shook his head sadly. "All dubious occupations, Mr. Maasten, fitting perhaps for a very dubious character."

"I don't see what my past has to do with Marques de Maerez's accident," I said stiffly.

"Ah, but it was no accident," Garcia said, "we found a bullet from a Winchester rifle in the bodywork of de Maerez's car."

I shook my head slowly: "I have no such gun," I said. "Even if I had I'd be hardly likely to use it inside a car in which I was travelling."

Garcia nodded: "But you have friends, Mr. Maasten, dubious friends."

"If you're accusing me, Señor Garcia," I said quietly, "I'd like to have a lawyer and my Consul present."

Garcia laughed shortly. "They wouldn't be much use," he said. "Here we do not have the dubious liberalism of habeas corpus."

He glanced cursorily at me. "Tell me about the girl in the bar of the hotel. The one with the Fiat Abarth."

I shrugged. "There's nothing to say. I'd never seen her before that afternoon. Pedro was there with us all the time. Why don't you ask him?"

"I already have," Garcia said. "You tell me. For the record."

For the record I told him. He made copious notes, blotted them and looked up: "Who is Ronson?"

"That was a joke."

"I don't understand."

I made a wry face. I had been afraid of that.

Half an hour later he still hadn't understood. Worse, he still refused me access to a lawyer or the British Consul. He had written Ronson on his pad in big letters.

He passed me a photograph of a man in his late fifties. A man with long greying sideburns and a lantern jaw, squinting into the camera out of deep set eyes. There were trenches joining his nostrils to the side of his mouth and a glazed far away expression in those eyes as if he was frightened of meeting disaster round the next corner.

"Do you know this man?" Garcia asked.

"No," I said. "Who is he?"

"A dubious character," Garcia said. "A Pole. He used to be de Maerez's chauffeur. His name is Lladlo Hasek."

I didn't say anything. I knew of Lladlo Hasek. For many years he had worked for the Corsicans in Marseilles and after he had been arrested on a drug trafficking charge had set up on his own. He was the fifth best gun in Europe. Or had been. De Maerez must have been a very frightened man to have hired him and it couldn't have been because of the stamps.

I leaned across the desk and looked into Garcia's face. "I did not have anything to do with de Maerez's death," I said. "If I had, for some wild reason arranged for him to be ambushed, you can bet your life I wouldn't have been sitting in the car at the same time."

"That is for me to decide," Garcia said and pinged a bell on his desk to summon the two policemen who had brought me to him. "I will speak to you in two hours. I would advise you to use the time to consider your position very carefully. In two hours if you do not tell me the truth, the consequences will be extremely painful."

* * *

The next two hours were amongst the most unpleasant that I have ever spent. I was left in a tiny cell that stank of stale food and ordure. The bed was hard and I had barely enough room to stand or walk more than ten paces. What concerned me most was that my present physical discomfort seemed only the beginning, a foretaste of what was to follow.

I realised that Garcia's whole future depended upon his finding de Maerez's killer, and quickly. So, if he couldn't find the killer,

he had to find someone who was, in Garcia's words, dubious enough to be treated as one. Given the choice between his future and mine, I had little doubt as to what decision Garcia would take.

I was also certain as to what I could expect at our next meeting. The suave policeman would have disappeared. Instead there would be the brute, the righteous descendant of the Spanish Inquisitors. I shuddered. They had had terrible tortures in those days and I was certain that someone like Garcia must have learned most of them.

The frightening thing was that whatever he did, there was nothing I could tell him. Of course, I could say that I had seen the girl again. But that would do me no good. It would only involve me in de Maerez's shooting more deeply.

I tried to eat some of the black bread and thin soup they had left for me. Nourishment would make me better able to withstand the ordeal that was to follow. The mere thought of the ordeal however was sufficient to make my stomach twist convulsively. I broke out into a feverish sweat and my head began to ache as if it was splitting apart.

I freely admit that when the policemen came for me I was in pretty bad shape.

* * *

Garcia was standing outside his office. He waved cheerily at me as the policemen pushed me along the corridor and then he opened the door of his office, smiling.

"Go in, Mr. Maasten," he cried. "Go in and sit down."

"I have nothing to say," I told him with what firmness I could muster. "I think it would be best if you were to let me go."

Gently Garcia prodded me through the door. "I know that," he said. "If you had told me before that the Marquesa de Maerez herself would confirm your story, you could have saved yourself an uncomfortable few hours."

To be honest, I'd never thought of that. "I wasn't sure—" I began and it was only then that I saw the Marquesa de Maerez seated on the further side of Garcia's desk.

"Mr. Maasten, you should have let me know," she cried. "I telephoned the hospital to find out how you were and it was they who told me you were with Señor Garcia."

Garcia sat down behind his desk. He looked serious again. "Mr. Maasten," he said, "the Marquesa de Maerez assures me that you had genuine business to transact with her husband, and that the decision to travel to Zürich together was taken by him, late on the night before the accident. She also states that you are a long standing business acquaintance of her husband's and that she will personally vouch for you." He paused to let the words sink in. "That is the only reason why I am letting you leave here before my enquiries are completed."

He steepled his hands over his chest and looked at me sternly over them. "I would ask you to remember," he said, "that we are members of Interpol and that murder is an extraditable offence. Remember that at any time and for any reason I could have you brought back here."

The Marquesa got to her feet with a scrape of leather. She was wearing jodhpurs, riding boots and a leather jerkin. She looked most disturbingly unlike a widow.

"Thank you, Señor Garcia," she cried. "I will look after Mr. Maasten for you." She came across the room to me smiling. "I have a car outside," she said. "We can leave as soon as you are ready."

7

She had a white Alfa Romeo Sprint Coupé outside and a few minutes later we were speeding out of de Maerez towards the castle. She passed me a pack of Sobranie.

"Thank you," I said, "for helping me."

I lit two cigarettes and passed one to her. She kept her eyes on the road as she took the cigarette from me. "I was hoping, Mr. Maasten, you would ask what you could do for me in return."

I didn't say anything. Outside the sunshine was bright and hard, the orange groves falling along the hill in ragged lines. Sooner or later, I thought, everything came down to what you could do for someone.

We turned past the huge wrought-iron gates into the castle grounds and spurted up the gravel drive.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

She braked to a tyre-scrubbing stop under the porch. "Later, Mr. Maasten," she said, flicking a glance at her wrist. "For the present, I would like you to attend a meeting."

I followed the Marquesa up the steps that looked like a set for Potemkin towards the eastern wing of the castle.

As we hurried through the spacious halls, the sound of her riding boots rang hollowly along the marble floors.

She turned to me and said: "I hope you are not surprised to find me dressed like this. I like riding. It relaxes me."

I gave her a non-committal smile. I was busy looking at a set of Victorian miniatures. They would be worth at least £600 if I could get them back to London. I was wondering if I was able to take them, whether anyone would notice.

The Marquesa led me to a room at the end of the eastern wing.

It was furnished as a study, and I imagined it had been de Maerez's. Two men were waiting in the room and they rose as we entered, stoop shouldered, clutching their hats like shields in front of their bodies.

The Marquesa waved them seated and with the same gesture flung her riding crop on a vacant chair. She introduced them as Señor Sanchez and Señor Diaz. Sanchez was the steward to the de Maerez estates and Diaz, lawyer to the family. The Marquesa picked up a cigarette box and stood for a moment, staring out of the room, over the ragged rise and fall of the land that turned and twisted in brown and green gyrations till it reached the sea. There was a certain arrogance in her face, a kind of assured possessiveness, as she gazed out over the land. It was her land, every blessed inch of it.

She turned and faced into the room. "Well?" she asked.

The men shuffled their feet under the desk. One of them cleared his throat hesitantly. It seemed there was a question of precedence here. They were unable to decide who should speak first.

The Marquesa felt their hesitance. "Sanchez?" she said and rolling the unlit cigarette between her fingers walked round the desk.

Sanchez shied like a nervous horse. He was a long, stringy man with a long, bony face and a habit of twitching the right side of his mouth as if to clear a nostril. Now as he started to speak he gave a sudden twitch. The Marquesa shuddered.

"It is not good," Sanchez said slowly. "We will have to sell some of the land. I have the books—"

The Marquesa smiled. "You know I don't understand them, Sanchez."

He gave a gracious nod. "Madam has greater knowledge than she displays."

But the Marquesa had already turned to Diaz: "And what did you find?" she asked.

Diaz rolled his mouth as if he was sucking a sweet. He was a lawyer with a sizeable practice and he represented other illustrious families besides that of de Maerez. He cleared his throat and looked ruminatively at his feet. "Not very much," he said apologetically. Then he looked hesitantly up.

Diaz was a bigger man than Sanchez and effected a heavy toothbrush moustache. He was wearing his best suit, a pale grey

worsted with a black armband, not I suspected because he was in mourning but because he wanted everyone to know whose home he had just been to.

"What did you find, Diaz?" the Marquesa asked.

"Two bank accounts. One in the village with about forty thousand pesetas. It has already been handed over to Señor Sanchez."

He paused waiting for Sanchez's acknowledgment.

Sanchez cleared his throat: "I am pleased to confirm," he said and blinked.

"The other account is in Madrid. It is in your joint names, madam, and has nearly a million pesetas in it. As soon as I can give them proof of probate they will let you have the money."

"How long will that take?"

Diaz fluttered white hands that looked like sickly butterflies. "Two weeks, three weeks."

"Is that all?"

"No, madam. I found out about the sources of the deposits. They all represented cash bankings or inter-account transfers, except for one transaction, effected by the firm of Legermann & Cie in Zürich." He gave her an ingratiating smile. "But I suppose you knew of that?" His tone was expectant.

"I know that," the Marquesa said. "That is exactly what the manager of the Banco de Bilbao told me. All my husband's bankings have been in cash except for one, eight months ago. That transfer too was made by Legermann & Cie in Zürich."

"If that is all the money there is," Sanchez asked despairingly, "what shall we do?"

The Marquesa looked questioningly at Diaz. Diaz was looking at the carved leg of the desk. The desk was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, worth nearly 200,000 pesetas. Diaz seemed to be wondering whether it would realise such an amount if the Marquesa were to have to sell it.

"We must sell some of the land," he said. "I know some gringos—English property speculators—"

"How much time do we have?" the Marquesa interrupted.

The two men looked at each other.

"Two months," Sanchez said.

Diaz simply nodded.

"Fine," the Marquesa said. "Keep talking to the gringos,"

and very slowly, very deliberately so that they could see how steady her hand was, the Marquesa lit a cigarette.

* * *

The Marquesa shut the door of the study, blocking out the receding footsteps of Sanchez and Diaz. There was a thoughtful expression on her face as she walked across the room and took out a bottle of sherry from the gilded rococo commode. The commode was a bad Spanish copy of French design of the Louis XV period. It was covered with weird flower motifs and was an altogether unremarkable piece. It was as good a place as any, I thought, to keep liquor.

The Marquesa handed me a palely glistening glass and walked over to the window. Silence filled the room.

De Maerez's study was a large oblong room, lined with heavy leather bound volumes in Spanish that looked as if they had been frequently dusted but rarely read. More indicative of de Maerez's taste was the shelf filled with detective stories. Wilkie Collins, Agatha Christie, Durenmatt, Simenon, Dorothy Sayers. There was nothing by Chandler, Fleming, Deighton or Gavin Lyall. A table by the desk was covered with a neat stack of yellowing copies of the *Wall Street Journal* and *Neue Zuricher Zeitung*, and of course the gorgeously pink *Financial Times*. Above these were a shelf containing volumes of Stock Indices, imposing works on European Taxation and Company Law, a handful of Company Prospectuses. His desk was huge and bare, except for a cigar humidor.

The Marquesa asked from the window: "Mr. Maasten, do you understand my problem?"

"Yes," I said. The Marques de Maerez had obviously been a secretive man. Now that he was dead there was some difficulty in discovering where he had kept his money. It was not an uncommon or an unusual problem. What puzzled me was where I fitted into it.

The Marquesa said: "Mr. Maasten, I have decided to trust you."

"No," I said quickly. "Don't do that. I'm not very good at keeping secrets."

She turned to face me. There was an amused expression on her face. "Nicholas," she asked quietly, "can you use a gun?"

Guns make me nervous. Whenever I've had to carry one, I've always been aware of the fact that there was someone else who was also carrying a gun, and who might be better, or faster, or have something with more firepower.

"Guns make me nervous," I said truthfully.

"What did you use in Africa?" the Marquesa asked. "Catapults?"

"That was different," I said.

"According to Garcia, not so much different."

I gave vent to the pious hope that Garcia's *cojones* would be severed by a Madrid tram.

The Marquesa laughed. "For a gringo," she said, "you swear uncommonly well."

I recognised the look in her eyes and shook my head rapidly. "No," I said. "Oh no. No."

"Nicholas," the Marquesa said, "I need help."

"Look," I said, "I know people. I've got connections. Give me a day and I'll find you the best gunman in Europe."

She shook her head slowly. "Nicholas," she said, "I need someone now."

"I'm only an amateur," I said. "Besides, loud noises frighten [illegible]"

She came and stood in front of me. I stared up at her thighs, strained taut against the rough material of the breeches. She smelled warm and earthy, all horse and hay. A warm wave of desire swept through me. Maybe it was something to do with my childhood.

"Nicholas," she said, "I have to go to Switzerland. There are some people who might try to stop me getting there. I want someone who will make sure that I get to Switzerland and back." She smiled. "Someone like you, Nicholas. Someone who can use a gun. Someone who is not afraid."

"You don't need me," I muttered. "I've got enough fear for both of us."

"Switzerland," the Marquesa said, "will be nice. Much nicer than one of Garcia's cells."

"True," I said. I didn't have any choice. I said: "I'd like to come to Switzerland with you but I haven't got a gun."

"I have," she said and handed me the Luger that had once belonged to her husband.

We left for Switzerland soon afterwards. We took the shorter route that led across the Sierras and hardly an hour after our conversation, I was twisting the Alfa Romeo up the giant granite foothills towards those endless snow peaks that looked like jagged mirrors. An autumn sun burst down like burnished silver. The engine screamed in the thinning air as I hurled the car around the corners. I had my own reasons for wanting to go to Switzerland, but neither Garcia nor the Marquesa were to know that.

We drove all that afternoon, hurrying past towns and villages, past orange groves and rice fields. Names flashed by in a dazed blur, Alicante, Almenara, Vinaroz, Mataro. I drove like an automaton, my mind focused like a pinpoint of light through a magnifying glass on time and distance and speed.

It was late evening when we came to the twisty section near Figueras and crossed the border into France.

A strong wind whipped off the Golfe du Lion making the car skitter unhappily across the camber. The air felt colder too and my body was stiff and cramped from the long journey. I decided that if we went on to Pont St. Esprit we could stop there and still reach Zürich the next day during banking hours.

* * *

The hotel was shabbily genteel, its lobby framed in dark wood, crowded with lumpy overstuffed chairs. It was a few kilometres beyond Pont St. Esprit, and if the wind was in the right direction you could hear the rumble of traffic along the autoroute de sud. The wind was in the right direction.

Upstairs the smell of must and mothballs overcame the down-

stairs smell of coffee and French polish. The spartan beds were covered with thick patterned eiderdowns. I coaxed dollops of steamy water into the bath and leant across to the window. A metal radiator shaped like an ornamental stove rumbled against my knees. Just as I expected, I had a splendid view of the hotel car park.

Even better, I didn't see what I was expecting to. Twice already that afternoon I had been scared gutless.

The first time a white Volvo had lurched out of a side turning and followed, stationed a regulation twenty-five yards behind. I didn't know what to do and my helplessness worried me more than what the occupants of the Volvo could possibly do to us. I drove as quickly as I dared and hoped. For twenty kilometres the Volvo did that too. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the Volvo went.

The next occasion was more frightening. We were approaching the autorqute near Montpellier when a black Citroën DS loomed in my mirror, scuttling silently fast behind us. I let it stay there. It was not, after all, unusual to be followed along an autoroute. It was only near Nîmes when the Citroën began to close right up that I panicked.

There were two men in the Citroën, sitting very erect. They both wore snap brimmed felt hats. I felt my mouth go dry as I eased the Luger from my pocket. I also put my foot hard down on the accelerator and tried to lose them.

The Citroën must have been hotted up, because near the end of the autoroute it flashed alongside. My heart lurched and I turned raising the Luger, my body braced for the staccato shock of machine-gun bullets.

Then the Citroën was gone, streaking along the turn-off to Arles, trafficator blinking rapidly like a ferocious yellow eye.

There were only three vehicles in the car park below me. All of them looked as if they had been there some time, and none of them was a Citroën or a Volvo.

A diminished spluttering told me the bath was near full. I drew the blinds, undressed, tested the water and climbed in. In case of sudden eventualities I placed the Luger conveniently in the soap dish.

* * *

I sat back and luxuriated. I stretched out in the nearly scalding water and felt the stiffness drain out of my tired muscles. I smoked a damp cigarette and felt euphoric. The only sudden eventualities were passionate thoughts about Arabella and thoughts about the Marquesa, which if anything, were rather more lewd. I realised that in some circumstances ten days could be a bloody long time.

I thought quickly of Zürich, grey and antiseptic, sterile as a freshly minted silver coin. Zürich, the city of Calvin. Zürich, the city of Gnomes. Zürich, where I had to drive to the next day and arrive during banking hours. Zürich, where I would find £6,000.

Only it wasn't as simple as driving there. Somewhere between Pont St. Esprit and Zürich were people, enemies of the Marquesa, people who were determined to stop us reaching Zurich. I felt my mouth go dry as it had when the black Citroën had begun to close up. It would all have been much safer, I reflected, if the Marquesa had hired a proper bodyguard in the first place. Not only would she have been far better protected, but as long as I kept away from her, I would have been better protected too.

I looked nervously at the Luger beside the soap dish. Like me, it had begun to sweat. The obviously sensible thing to do was for me to abandon the Marquesa. I agree, it wasn't gentlemanly, but then I wasn't a gentleman. I was a prisoner and a prisoner's first duty is to escape. But where?

There was no point in my going just anywhere. I had to get to Zürich. Not only had I to get to Zürich, but I had to get there before the Marquesa did. I thought hopefully about Avignon. Avignon was forty kilometres away, half an hour's drive. There was an airport at Avignon. I thought about that for a while and wondered whether there would be flights to Switzerland at that time of the night. I considered the possibility carefully, and decided not. It was the season of longer nights and greater darkness, of fewer travellers and skeleton schedules. Besides, I couldn't believe the Marquesa would, during the time it would take me to drive to Avignon, sit alone in the dining-room and equably have dinner. No! By the time I got to Avignon, the Marquesa would have spoken to the French police.

The worst thing about policemen of any nationality is the readiness with which they believe anything that is false or malicious or untrue, as long as they can bring a charge to support

it. I had no reason to believe the French police would be any different. They had after all not been overly sympathetic to Basque Nationalists seeking asylum in France. I could imagine quite vividly how they would react to someone wanted for murder by their Spanish colleagues.

I looked up through the steam at the lamp above my head. The dull yellow globe was covered with a thin chain of dried insects. I knew precisely how they had felt.

There was no help for it. I would have to go to Zürich with the Marquesa tomorrow. Which meant I had to make bloody sure I could cope with her enemies, whoever they were.

I was thinking about routes to the Swiss border when I realised that the Marquesa's enemies would not be a problem. Yet. So far as I could see, they had not followed us out of Spain and did not know we were in Pont St. Esprit. Even if, by some kind of primeval intelligence, they did know, it wouldn't make any difference.

There were at least six routes I could take from Pont St. Esprit to Geneva and if I really wanted to outwit them, there were at least a dozen points through which I could enter Switzerland.

I began to feel euphoric again. Until I realised that the Marquesa's enemies must have known this too and that they would be waiting for us in Zürich.

* * *

"You're late," the Marquesa said as I went up to her, the Luger tugging uncomfortably at my pocket. "I hope you like Châteaubriand."

"The book or the place?"

"The food. They only serve it in portions for two people." She poured some wine into my glass.

"I like Châteaubriand," I said.

The dining-room was a large gothic structure, with black furniture and pink wallpaper. Red tassellated shades covered the electric candles on each table, and the cloths were pink and too small so that from a distance they gave the impression of being black edged.

The only other diners were two couples right across the room from us. They spoke in loud whispers and peered anxiously

around them with a hesitant air. Tourists, I thought, relieved and turned back to the Marquesa.

"When we get to Zürich," I said, "you'd better hire a proper bodyguard."

"When we get to Zürich," the Marquesa replied, "I may not need a bodyguard." She looked at me steadily across the table. "Anyway, I'll think about it. Tell me, you have some experience in business?"

I wondered what else she had read on my file. "No," I said. "Not really."

"But enough," she said.

"When we get to Zürich," I said, "you should also get yourself a lawyer."

The Marquesa smiled. "I need someone who is shrewd," she said. "And greedy." She raised her glass and held it in front of her face. "To us," she said and drank quickly.

I drank quickly too. I felt I neeeded it.

"Your wound? Does it hurt?"

"Only when I worry," I said. The cut on my head had not been very deep, though, like all scalp wounds, it had bled profusely. Soon I would be able to take the plaster off the healing sutures.

The Marquesa had changed into a loose-fitting mauve blouse which was nearly transparent. She was wearing very little make-up and her hair was pulled well back from her head, revealing the nearly perfect oval of her face. Botticelli, I thought, could have been inspired by a face like that. Then I thought of more serious things.

"Why are we going to Switzerland?" I asked.

"I thought you already knew that," she replied. "You were present at the meeting with Sanchez and Diaz."

"That doesn't explain why you're taking me."

"I suppose you want to know everything."

I shrugged. "I don't want to end up shooting the wrong people," I said.

The Marquesa laughed. "That's most unlikely," she cried. "Helmut Beck is unique."

9

I WAITED TILL the Châteaubriand had been sliced and served and the sauce Bearnaise poured all over it. The *pommes frites* did not crackle like paper and if I was Egon Ronay I would have sent it back. I wasn't Egon Ronay.

"Who is Helmut Beck?" I asked.

"He says he's a lawyer in Zürich," she replied.

"Why are you afraid of him?"

"It's a long story," she said. "The first time I saw Helmut Beck was at my husband's funeral. It was halfway through the service. The priest was chanting the Dies Irae when this long black Mercedes crunched up to the steps of the church.

"Everyone turned to look at it, I did too."

"Four men climbed out of the car and walked over to the flower strewn mound of earth by Alfonso's open grave. They stood staring at the grave for a while, then they came up the steps into the church. All of them were identically dressed in brown suits and they all wore hats. For a moment they stood in the doorway, hesitating. Then one of them hissed, 'For Christ's sake! Take your hats off!' "

The Marquesa paused and took a sip of wine. "The Châteauneuf is excellent," she said. "It's almost like burgundy."

Next time, I thought, she could have dinner with Egon Ronay.

* * *

"At first," she continued, "I thought the men were friends of Alfonso's, business associates. They knelt at the back of the church and I saw them file out before the coffin." She leaned forward. "There was another stranger at the funeral, too. A

small, furtive-looking man standing behind a pillar. I saw him as I turned to follow the coffin. I remember he did not genuflect.

"It was after the burial that Beck spoke to me. I had thrown the first handful of earth over the coffin and the people of the village were forming a queue in front of me to offer me their condolences. They were faces I recognised from childhood, the priest who had given me my first communion, our family doctor, Sanchez, Diaz, the owners of the *bodegas* in de Maerez, the proprietor of the granary store. I remember the Mayor's chain swinging against my wrist and Señor Garcia telling me I was not to worry about anything.

My mind was dulled. I was repeating the same hypnotic phrases over and over again when suddenly there was this big man standing in front of me wearing a brown suit that did not fit him too well. He took my hand and bent over it. 'My deepest sympathies,' he said softly, 'my very deepest sympathies.' His hair was thin and streaky, a muddy brown colour. I remember his scalp was very pink.

'My name is Helmut Beck,' he said. 'Your husband and I did business together.'

I don't remember what I said. It must have been something trite, like: 'Thank you for attending the funeral.'

Then Beck raised his head. He had a sad fleshy face, with jowls that drooped like a bloodhound's. 'It is important I see you soon,' he said. 'There is much to tell you.'

I was still dazed, confused. 'Come to the house tonight,' I said, 'at seven thirty.'

Beck came precisely at seven thirty. He had said he had business to discuss, so I received him in Alfonso's study. Beck seemed uneasy. He refused to sit down and paced beside the bookshelves, touching the spines of the books as if they were all he had left of something that had been very precious.

'I can't tell you, Marquesa,' he said, 'how grieved, how very deeply grieved we all are. Your husband was a great man.' There was a hoarse, strained quality to his voice which together with his heavy breathing made me think he was an asthmatic. He also smelt strongly of mint.

I offered him a drink.

Beck hesitated. Then he said, 'For the occasion, a little Sauterne, perhaps.'

Even after he had taken the drink he did not sit down. He kept

wandering about the study, glancing uncomfortably around him, running an abstracted finger over the piles of financial journals.

'It is awkward,' he said at last, 'to talk about business at a time like this.' I leaned against the desk swirling my fifth brandy round in its glass. 'What must be, must be,' I said. 'You were a colleague of my husband's?'

Beck looked at me across the length of the room. 'You might say that,' he said softly, 'you might very well say that.' He sipped his wine and made a soft sucking noise with his lips. 'How much,' he asked, 'did you know about your husband's business?'

'Enough,' I said.

'Did you know about Steinmeyer?'

'He never mentioned names.'

'Strange,' Beck said. 'I find that very strange.' He sipped his wine again and ran a little pink tongue around his lips.

I decided to take the initiative. 'What exactly is your business?' I demanded. 'How were you connected with my husband?'

'That my dear,' Beck said, 'is a very long story. I am afraid we do not have the time to go into it now. Suffice it to say that your husband and I worked for the same ideals. We worked for the same people.'

'He paused and sipped his wine. 'I looked upon your husband as an older brother.'

That was ludicrous. Alfonso had no close friendships. 'He never mentioned you,' I said pointedly.

'He wouldn't,' Beck replied equably. He walked slowly across to the bookcase, stopped and turned to face me. 'Would you say, my dear,' he asked, 'that your husband was of a nervous disposition? That he was, perhaps, frightened?'

'No,' I said.

'But he hired bodyguards,' Beck insisted.'There was someone called Hans Rutteman and after him, Lladlo Hasek, one of Europe's best known gunmen. What happened to Hasek?'

From time to time, Nicholas, Alfonso kept large sums of cash at the castle. That is why, I think, he employed these people. I believe that it is for the same reason that he kept a Derringer in the top drawer of his desk and a Luger in a special compartment in the Mercedes.

I told Beck: 'Hasek wanted to retire.'

'And your husband couldn't find anyone else?' Beck asked.

'If he had bodyguards,' I snapped at him, 'it was because we live in an isolated part of the country.'

'I was just exemplifying a point, my dear. Your husband was a worried man. Not only did he have bodyguards, but he was never far away from a gun.'

'It is not unusual,' I said, 'for people like my husband to wish to protect themselves.'

'But he couldn't.' Beck was smiling now, one of those intimate, knowing smiles. 'I make the point to show how vulnerable you are. Neither the guns nor the gunmen could save your husband. I do not think they will save you.'

For the first time since I had met Beck, I began to feel really afraid. 'I don't know why you came here,' I said. 'If you hope to threaten me you are a fool. You are a stranger in de Maerez. I could have you arrested just like that.' I snapped my fingers at him.

'That will not, I am afraid, solve your problem. I do not wish to offend you, my dear. I simply wanted to put things in perspective. Your husband, you see, had something that belongs to friends of mine.'

'Madre Dios!' I exclaimed. "If that is so then why talk of guns! If my husband has something of yours, of course you shall have it back.'

'I am pleased to hear you say that, my dear, very pleased. I am pleased that we can settle everything so smoothly. Now tell me where did your husband keep the shares in Odessa?'

'I know nothing about Odessa,' I said.

Beck sighed loudly. 'I thought you would say that,' he said, almost sadly. He picked up his drink and ambled towards me. It was surprising how big he suddenly looked and how single mindedly ominous his walk became.

'You are being extremely foolish,' he said as if I were a tiresome little girl. 'Extremely foolish.'

'I know nothing about shares,' I said angrily. 'What is Odessa? And why are these shares so important?'

'Odessa is a company that your husband formed together with certain other people. Due to circumstances beyond anyone's control, your husband has, in recent years, been the sole administrator of this company's affairs. Now that he is dead, the true owners of Odessa would like to have control, and in order to do this they must have their shares back.'

'Who are they?' I asked.

'They wish to be anonymous.' Beck reached into his pocket and brought out an engraved card. 'As you can see I am a lawyer, working in Zürich. I represent the true owners of these funds.'

'Then when I find the certificates, you can discuss the whole question of ownership with my lawyers.'

Beck shook his head. 'It is unfortunately not that simple, my dear,' he said. 'For certain very good reasons, these people wish to remain anonymous. The shares in the company are bearer shares. As far as the law is concerned those funds belong to your late husband.'

'How much do they amount to?'

'I couldn't say precisely,' Beck replied. 'Let us say the funds are considerable.'

I asked Beck: 'You have something, some papers, some notarisation, some documents to show that you represent these people, something to show that they have a right to these funds?'

Beck shook his head. 'Alas! No. Even if I had it would be of little use.' He stepped closer to me and rested his glass on the desk. 'Let me explain,' he said. 'The funds are in the name of a company. Your husband was the only person who could operate the company's account which is in a numbered account in a Swiss bank. In order to get at the money I have to produce a number in your husband's handwriting, which is now impossible. So I must produce the company's share certificates, or the *zessionserklärung*—you know the word—the founders certificate—before they would let me or my clients operate the account.'

'So you have no proof,' I said.

'No,' Beck said, 'no proof.'

'If that is the case, even if I knew where these documents were, why should I hand them over to you?'

'Because I have the right to them,' Beck said. 'Because that is what your husband would have wished.'

He was breathing mint all over me and there was an ugly expression on his face.

I moved sideways along the desk, edging away from him. 'I don't believe you,' I said. 'I think you are an imposter.'

Beck moved along with me, his eyes filled with a plea that was almost desperation. 'Think,' Beck said softly. 'Think how your husband died. Please believe me, my dear, you are dealing with dangerous people. Those who come after me will not bother to ask.'

I laughed. It was difficult and I stopped a split second before the fear inside me tore the laughter to shreds. All my life I had been taught not to show fear, to laugh at anything that frightened me. Now I forced myself to smile and said: 'If what you say is true, I should not give you anything. As long as I have the documents, and I am the only person who knows where they are, then no-one dare kill me.'

'There are other ways,' Beck said. 'They would think nothing of removing the skin from your lovely body, layer by layer, if it would give them what they want.' He came even closer. 'Think what it would feel like if they put a live rat inside your stomach.'

I tried to control my shudder and pointed to an oil painting on the wall. 'That man there, my great uncle, once killed one hundred and thirty-two Moors in a single day.'

'One hundred and fifty years ago.' Beck said flatly, 'You are in the era of the aircraft hijack and the telescopic gunsight. These people will not let you live to spend their money.'

'Did they kill my husband?'

'No,' Beck said. 'They did not do that. They loved him and they respected him. And they will take—have already taken—partial revenge. My dear, please listen to me. Give me the certificates and all will be well. My friends will see that you do not need for anything.'

'A pension from what is legally mine?' I demanded scornfully.

'Not yours,' Beck said, 'not yours.'

It was then that Beck showed me the photograph. It was slightly crumpled, the kind of picture that is taken with a Polaroid camera. 'That is,' he said holding out the photograph to me, 'one of the men who plotted the murder of your husband.'

I looked and felt sick. The face bore only the vaguest resemblance to anything human. The eyes were bloody sockets, the nose squashed as a flattened tyre. The jaw hung slack and toothless and there was a concave indentation on the high domed forehead that looked as if it had been made with a boot heel. Somewhere underneath the blood and the mess there I recognised the thin-faced man who had been at the funeral, the man who had knelt behind a pillar and who had not genuflected.

'Madre Dios!' I cried, 'What are you?'

Beck put the photograph away. 'My clients will stop at nothing,' he said. 'For revenge or to obtain what is rightfully theirs.' With a surprisingly quick movement he turned and began

to walk towards the safe. 'Let me have the certificates,' he said. 'And then all will be well.'

'There is nothing in the safe,' I cried, but he ignored me.

I watched that heavy shapeless bulk waddle towards the safe, place its hand on the handle that protected Alfonso's secrets and I became very angry. This lawyer has no right, I thought, he has no right at all.

I stepped round the desk, opened the top right hand drawer and took out the Derringer.

'Get away from that safe,' I said. 'Or I will shoot.'

Beck stopped and turned. The disbelief in his eyes changed to resignation. He sighed heavily. 'My dear,' he said, 'you shouldn't. Please allow my friends to help you.' His expression was pained.

'You have one hour to leave de Maerez,' I said flatly. 'If you are still here after that, I will have you thrown in jail.'

Beck sighed again. He took out a plastic container and rolled a pellet of mint into his mouth. 'You are overwrought,' he said, 'I should have been more thoughtful. You need time to think. Please call me in Zürich at any time within the next two days.'

'Get out,' I said. My gun hand was trembling."

10

I PUSHED AWAY my plate and poured more wine into my glass. Châteauneuf is a strong earthy wine. I was glad that it also had a high alcohol content.

"What did you do after that?" I asked.

"For a long time, nothing."

"You should have called Señor Garcia."

The Marquesa nodded. "I thought about that," she admitted. "But I didn't. I didn't call Señor Garcia because I didn't know what kind of business Alfonso had been involved in that compelled him to have associates like Beck. I didn't want an investigation into Alfonso's affairs, until I, at least, knew what they were."

"What do you know about Odessa?" I asked.

The Marquesa shrugged. "Only what Beck told me," she said. "I hope to find out more about Odessa in Switzerland."

"And you think Beck might stop you?"

"He might. Or he might not. That depends on you."

I drank more wine. "Have you not been through your husband's papers?" I enquired. "Was there nothing there about Odessa or where he kept his money?"

The Marquesa took out a cigarette and waited for me to light it. "I am ashamed to admit it, Nicholas," she said, "but after Beck left that is precisely what I did. You must realise, Nicholas," she went on, "that Alfonso and I had clearly defined areas of privacy. One of them was his business life."

I nodded. I wondered what her area of privacy had been.

"I never enquired what Alfonso did or how he made his money. I never asked where he went on his business trips, whom he saw, or what he bought and sold. But now I had to know, I had to

find out how Alfonso had provided for me. I had to find out about Odessa, and who held his shares and where his assets were kept. I was interested in these things, not for myself alone. The whole future of the de Maerez estate depended on the answers.

"After Beck left I sat down and thought a long time. I also drank two more brandies. I remember thinking how much like Alfonso his study had become. Rich, neat, accurate. Even the inkwells were parallel to the line of the desk. Behind the desk was the safe, you must have noticed. Finally I made up my mind.

"I took the keys the police had given me and opened the safe. The safe was about four feet high and nearly as deep. It was filled with the records of his business, all neatly filed on an annual basis. In one drawer were the details of a comprehensive index system. The records went back over thirty years and they were all indexed and cross referenced. Alfonso's income seemed to have been generated from a large number of investments.

"I couldn't think why he should have been so secretive about that.

"All the files contained were accounts and statistical analyses. There was no sign of a will or any correspondence.

"I glanced briefly through the accounts. At one time I had been trained to understand balance sheets and these showed that Alfonso's investments were worth a reasonable sum. But there was no indication of who administered them or where they were held.

"I had yet another brandy, and lit yet another cigarette. I tried to think of the most likely place where Alfonso would keep his files. Whom he would entrust with them."

"Your husband," I said, "was not Spanish."

The Marquesa looked quickly at me. "No," she said. "He was not."

I didn't say anything.

"I do not know," the Marquesa said, "what nationality Alfonso was."

"No," I said. "How did you first meet him?"

"I first met him at my great-aunt's home in Madrid. He was a bachelor in his early fifties then and I remember thinking how well preserved he was. All I ever knew about him was that he had come to Spain many years ago and was a highly successful business man."

"Is that why you married him?" The Marquesa flashed me a

look of surprise. Then deliberately she leaned forward, picked up her wine, sipped it and put the glass back on the table. She looked levelly at me. "Yes," she said.

I must have looked shocked because she snapped: "Don't let it trouble your bourgeois little soul, Nicholas. Marriage for economic reasons is a tradition as old as love."

"Right," I said. "Look at the kings and queens of Europe."

"Yes, look at them. On the day Alfonso freed the estates my father had mortgaged with the Banco de Bilbao I married him." The resentment had passed. She smiled. "In many ways, Nicholas, it was an ideal marriage. Alfonso gave me a financial stability which three centuries of scheming, hard drinking, whoring ancestors had dissipated. I had given him the entrée to important financial and business circles and in a country where 1.3 per cent of the population control 70 per cent of its wealth, that was very important."

"And how did you feel about it?" I asked. "How did you feel about being bartered like a prize-winning heifer?"

She laughed. "Nicholas," she said, "you are so middle-class." She leaned forward: "I wanted to marry Alfonso," she said. "It was important to preserve the de Maerez estate and besides—I liked Alfonso."

"He was much older than you."

"He was also much more mature. He was courteous and kind. He was always considerate and he worshipped me." She paused, thinking. "Alfonso was middle-class too. He was totally unable to comprehend being with someone whose ancestry could be traced back to the middle of the sixteenth century. He treated me with a kind of reverence and when we were first engaged and I brought him to de Maerez, he took great delight in the way the villagers averted their heads and in the extravagant courtesies of the local traders. Really I was glad that the *caiquismo* gave him so much pleasure."

"Caiquismo?"

"The respect people give to us. It is a small thing if you are born to it. Alfonso loved it so much that I made arrangements for him to be called the Marques de Maerez. That was worth a lot to him."

"You have no children?" I asked.

Her face clouded. "Alfonso wasn't Spanish," she said. "The heir to the de Maerez name must be full-blooded Spanish. I

didn't know Alfonso's nationality. I had always known him as Alfonso de Portugal. I didn't know his family or if he had any friends. Those were all within the area of privacy."

"You wouldn't have wanted him dead?" I asked.

She slapped me. A hard stinging blow that felt like a wand of nettles. "I liked Alfonso," she snapped. "I might have married him for money but I still liked him. I would not have him dead!"

"I am sorry," I said. "I had to ask."

Her hand shook as she poured more wine into her glass and lit a fresh cigarette.

I began to wonder about the man who had sought anonymity in the name Alfonso Portugal and security by alliance to an ancient lineage. I was thinking that the security Alfonso Portugal had bought had now run out.

"How seriously do you take Beck?" I asked.

"Seriously enough to hire you."

"Have you seen Beck since the funeral?"

She shook her head. "He left de Maerez that evening. I have not heard from him or seen him since."

That, I thought, was capable of more than one interpretation. Beck had not been bluffing when he had ordered Horowitz beaten up. Beck obviously had friends. Savage, powerful friends. They were the last people I wanted to meet, in Zürich, or anywhere else.

"Now, Beck will never believe that I do not have the shares," the Marquesa said. "He will never believe that Alfonso had not told me everything."

"What will you do," I asked, "if you find the shares?"

The Marquesa gave me a tight smile. "If I find the shares, why should I hand them over to strangers? The shares are bearer shares and I am sure you know enough about company law to realise that where bearer shares are concerned, possession is ten tenths of the law."

All I could think of was that we were going to need reinforcements in Zürich.

"Do you know how much the shares are worth?" I asked.

"No," the Marquesa said. "In fact I don't know what Alfonso's assets were worth. Late on the night of the funeral I called the manager of the Banco de Bilbao. I asked him to give me a listing of the amounts credited to Alfonso's account over the past six months. I asked him to let me know the source of the

bankings. I also asked Diaz for a listing of all Alfonso's bank deposits in Spain and a list of transactions over the past six months." She paused and looked at me. "Finally," she said, "I called Señor Garcia."

I put my cigarette out. With a slight shock I realised that it didn't matter to me how much money Alfonso de Portugal had. I was back to being the hired help again.

It was past two in the morning and we had finished a second bottle of Châteauneuf. I was feeling quite sleepy and there was a dull ache in the back of my neck that my doctors had said was a result of nervous strain. "About money?" I asked.

The Marquesa looked directly at me. The reflected pink of the tablecloth gave her face a heightened softness that was Madonna-like. Except Madonnas do not have calculating eyes.

"One hundred and fifty pounds for the week," she said. "Take it or leave it."

That was exactly what I'd been paid in Commando 15. I didn't need any further reminders that we were not that far from Garcia or the Spanish border.

"It's not enough," I said, "I am risking my life, remember?"

"Look at it another way, Nicholas," she said. "You may not have to do anything."

I took the Luger out of my pocket, wrapped it in a handkerchief and dropped it into her handbag.

"If all goes well," she said, "there will be a bonus for you."

"Thanks," I said drily.

We sat in silence for a while.

"I don't want you to have any illusions, Nicholas," the Marquesa said. "You're coming with me to Zürich."

I nodded. I had no illusions. "Why did you choose me?" I asked.

Reaching for her handbag, the Marquesa's hand touched mine. "Because you were there," she said and stood up. She looked down at me and smiled. "Underneath that bandage and all that hair you have an honest face. Do you know that, Nicholas?" She leaned across and dropped the Luger still wrapped in the handerkerchief into my lap. "You never know, Nicholas, you might need to use it tomorrow."

I was still rubbing my thigh when she bid me goodnight and went to her room, alone. I sat there waiting for the feeling to return to my leg. I still had de Maerez's cheque in my pocket. I

suppose because it was signed with a number and not a name, Garcia had not thought to connect it with the accident. If I reached the bank before they heard of de Maerez's death, they would honour the cheque, and then it wouldn't matter who had de Maerez's briefcase or what had happened to the stamps. I got up and walked slowly out of the empty dining-room, past the shuttered bar and along an empty corridor. There was only one problem. How could I convince the bank that de Maerez was alive, when the next morning I was going to turn up there with his widow?

Part Three

11

THE EYE-ACHINGLY-WHITE *Boeing 707 stood like a wounded bird, one luggage bay drooping inches above the tarmac. A flight of steps was drawn up by the open first-class passenger door, and almost underneath the nose of the aircraft stood a special-bodied Mercedes station wagon.*

The station wagon had been built on to a 600 Pullman chassis. The roof line had been raised three inches and the four passenger doors replaced by two wide steel slabs. The rear door was one piece too, and the windows and windscreen were coloured a death-like black.

As the plane sighed softly to itself, the large rear door of the Mercedes was raised and the hydraulically operated ramps swung out.

Six men climbed out of the Mercedes. They were all blond, all dressed in brown suits so identical that they might have been a uniform. They grouped around the foot of the ramps as the wheelchair slid slowly on to the tarmac.

Tenderly they transferred the shrivelled figure from the wheelchair to the stretcher. While two of the brown-suited men carried the stretcher into the plane, the others loaded their luggage, watched the bay being shut, and then carrying white Aerolineas Argentinas airline bags marched up the gangway.

Inside the 707, one of the seats at the front of the plane had been removed. The men filed into the first two rows of the first-class section.

As soon as they were in, the gangway was wheeled away and the door levered shut. With a light pitching motion the plane began to taxi towards its take-off point.

Minutes later, the 707 thundered down the runway like a flashing white arrow, folded its wheels and hurled itself at the sky, trailing quadruple plumes of dark smoke that hung in the hot, still, air.

* * *

It was different, the old man thought, this constant whining that threatened to pierce his eardrums. He still remembered quite clearly what it was like to fly in piston-engined aircraft, with their constant deep-throated drone and whirring propellers, their continuous pitching and buffeting that made one aware of the fragility of one's craft and the enormity of one's challenge. This flight was by comparison, unreal. It was all power and surge and then nothing. You couldn't even see very much, except clouds.

He sat very still in the single seat, his medical case beside him. There was a magazine rack on the bulkhead in front of him with a stack of airline timetables. It was cool in the aircraft and the air felt thin. It would be best, he thought, to sleep now. He closed his eyes and for a brief moment, before he willed himself to sleep, he wondered what it would be like to see Europe again.

12

We arrived in Zürich the next afternoon at the end of a steady, impatient, fulminating queue of Volkswagens and Opels. Illuminations from the shop windows washed palely across the snow-lined pavements. The sky was grey and oppressive with the heaviness of an impending snowfall. I lurched over the tramlines and circled past interminable road works towards the Banhofstrasse. In the half light of a winter afternoon a neon sign announced 'Twenty-four shopping days to Christmas'.

We went directly to the Hotel Oberwald. We had no reservations, but the mention of the de Maerez name found us rooms on separate floors.

As soon as the bellboy had checked the towels, turned on the lights, pocketed his fifty centimes and left, I douched water over my face and hands, adjusted the plaster on my forehead, rushed downstairs and cashed twenty pounds with the concierge. Then I went to the Marquesa's room.

She was still unpacking.

"I am ready whenever you are," I said and sat down.

Her room was larger than mine. It had a separate lounge, with a three piece suite, a television and a refrigerated drinks cabinet. A large hunting scene in the style of Turnbull covered the wall over the television. I found it irritating. It was as if the artist had decided that flattery was the more sincere form of imitation.

"Alfonso always stayed here," the Marquesa said.

"Nice," I said. "Very nice." I was getting rather tired of Alfonso.

She walked to the door of the separate bedroom. "Help yourself to a drink, Nicholas," she said, "I won't be long."

The phone rang. I grabbed it.

"Yes," I said. "Thank you. I would like to speak to Herr Legermann."

I paused. "I am speaking on behalf of the Marquesa de Maerez."

"Oh," I said. "I am sorry about that. We were hoping to meet Herr Legermann today." I made a face at the Marquesa and shrugged. "I suppose it can't be helped," I said. "Tomorrow morning at ten, then."

I put the phone down. The Marquesa was looking suspiciously at me.

"The bank," I said. "I called them to make an appointment for us to see Herr Legermann. He won't be there until tomorrow."

She frowned. "You are very efficient," she said slowly. "There will be no need for you to come to the bank with me."

"Oh," I said and tried to look disappointed. "You will see Herr Legermann tomorrow at ten."

"Yes. Meanwhile, I think I will do some shopping. Why don't you go away and amuse yourself for a couple of hours, Nicholas."

"That," I said, "sounds like an excellent idea."

As I passed through the lobby I cashed another ten pounds with the concierge. This time, the exchange rates were more favourable to sterling.

* * *

Legermann & Cie were on a corner of one of those narrow streets that trickle away from the Banhofstrasse like tiny tributaries from a river. It was over a restaurant that was decorated like a Greek funeral parlour, and the entrance to the building was blocked by a puke-green Lamborghini Espada, two wheels high on the pavement. I stepped into the pile of snow around it and hurried through a dark lobby to a lift at the back of the building.

The bank occupied the entire first floor, all eight thousand gleaming square feet of it. Heavy wooden counters topped by partitions of toughened glass separated the customers from their money and there were plastic notices in front of each division saying, Deposits, Withdrawals, Exchange, Current Accounts, Savings. I picked Withdrawals.

The clerk behind it was a serious looking young man with a harassed expression and celluloid shirt cuffs. He took the cheque and studied it, carefully smoothing it down on the counter with

outstretched fingers. His lips moved as he read the words and the figures to himself. When he had finished, he looked up at me and at the healing wound on my forehead. We both began to look worried.

"Moment," the clerk said, "One moment, please."

Clutching the cheque he disappeared through a door at the back. I waited and stared at the ledger posting machines spewing out oblong grey cards.

The clerk came back a few minutes later walking along my side of the counter. "You will come please and meet with Herr Legermann."

I hesitated. A meeting with the head of the bank was serious. Then I realised that I had done nothing wrong. The cheque represented the consummation of a valid transaction and it certainly wasn't my fault that de Maerez had lost the stamps.

"Please follow," the clerk said, his eyes still on my forehead.

"Please lead," I said and fell into step behind him.

* * *

We went round the side of the counter, through a door, up a short flight of steps and through another door marked '*Direktion*'. The corridor was ankle-deep in grey carpet and the doors leading off it were veneered in a dark solid-looking wood. Each had a silver metal plate screwed onto it, like the ones you see on expensive coffin lids. The clerk knocked on the one marked 'Legermann' and opened the door for me to enter.

Legermann was younger than I had expected, no more than a paunchy thirty-five. He also dressed differently. He was wearing a vividly printed shirt and a flared in suit that looked like sunrise over Carnaby Street. Whatever other qualities de Maerez's bankers might have had they certainly dressed differently. He transferred his cigar to his free hand and strode round the desk to greet me.

"Rudi Legermann," he announced, giving me one of those clear wide smiles that only the most expensive dentists can preserve. Legermann's breath smelt of *sensen* and whisky.

"Maasten," I said.

We sat down and looked at each other.

"What's wrong with the cheque?" I asked.

Legermann gave another bright smile. "A formality." He

looked at his watch. "Herr Stofel will explain. He will come back from lunch soon."

I didn't bother to ask how Herr Stofel, whoever he was, would explain, when if he was at lunch, he probably didn't know about the cheque in the first place.

Legermann looked anxiously at me across the wide desk. "Would you like a drink?"

"Brandy," I said.

"I expected someone much older," I said when he had poured out two large helpings of Napoleon. I eyed the shirt and the suit. "And a little more conservative," I added.

Legermann laughed again, the nervousness ringing through like the tap of Morse from a fog bound vessel. "That's what everyone says." He drew at the cigar. "I wish to change the image of banking. I want to show people that to be successful as a banker you do not have to be," again the smile, "a stuffed shirt. Here at Legermann & Cie I have made many changes. We invest more, we take risks more, we are more progressive, more adventurous, more" he paused again and brought the word out like a favourite sweet, "swinging."

I looked at the oak panelled walls and the Louis XV furniture. The style suited an older man, a different tradition. I wondered when young Rudi would get round to making the office look like a waiting room at London Airport.

"Your father founded the bank?"

"Yes. Over forty years ago. He is retired now. He is, I am afraid, seriously ill and is unable to work at all."

"I am sorry," I said.

"But never mind," Legermann said. "He earned the rest. And now he realises we are able to get on without him."

I nodded sombrely. "The Lamborghini outside? Yours?"

Legermann smiled, grateful that I had noticed. "Yes. You like them?"

"No," I said. "I like my cars to be race bred."

"Ah! A Ferrari man!"

"No," I said. "Ford. They won Le Mans twice."

Legermann frowned. "I don't understand," he said.

The bulb above the door flashed red and Legermann pressed a little button on his desk. "That is Stofel," he said, almost with a sigh of relief.

Stofel was a heavy, solid-looking man with a large square

close-cropped head and large square-lensed glasses that flashed in the light like angry mirrors. His complexion was blotchy, as if the layer on a raspberry cake had run, and he came into the room with a firm, purposeful tread.

"There is a problem about this cheque, Mr. Maasten," he said, carrying it round the desk between finger and thumb, as if the problem were especially distasteful. He stood by Legermann and looked disapprovingly at me.

"How did you get this cheque?" he asked.

"Someone gave it to me. A business acquaintance."

Stofel turned the cheque over to see if it had been endorsed. "Who?"

"You know as well as I do. The Marques de Maerez." I looked at both of them levelly.

"Why did he give you this cheque?" Stofel asked.

"With all respect, I don't think that has anything to do with you. The cheque is a valid one, the signature is authentic. So please pay it."

"We can't," Legermann said quietly.

"You mean the Marques has no funds!" I thought I put the right amount of incredulity into that.

Stofel said, "It is not a question of cash, Mr. Maasten, but one of banking practice. The Marques de Maerez is dead. We cannot honour this cheque." Stofel put the cheque down on the desk as if it were a used Kleenex.

"I am sorry," I said. "I am very sorry to hear that." I lit a cigarette and tried to lean back in a straight backed chair. It jarred my head. "What do I do about my money?" I asked. "What do I do about that?"

"That," Stofel said, "is a question you should discuss with your financial adviser."

I smoked in silence for a while.

Stofel said, "The Marques must have given you this cheque the day before he died."

"I wouldn't know," I said. "I didn't even know he was dead."

Stofel said, "He did. You can tell by the date." He looked mildly at me. "Nasty-looking wound that. How did you get it? A car accident?"

His eyes caught mine and held them.

At that moment there was a rapid knock on the door and a

slender young woman came in. She was too good-looking to be anything but Legermann's secretary.

"I am sorry to interrupt," she said in a low voice, looking directly at Legermann.

Stofel glared at her.

"What is it, Gabriella?" Legermann asked.

"It's Señor Ramirez, from Malaga. He insists on speaking to one of you."

"Tell him we are at a meeting," Stofel said. "We will ring him back."

"He says there is a four-hour delay on calls to Spain."

"I wonder what he wants," Legermann mused.

"It's his bank," the girl said. "They are not accepting our letter of credit. They say they want cash."

It was Stofel who intervened. "I'll talk with them," he said moving heavily across the room. I don't know whether it was for my benefit but he added, "The things those Spaniards get up to to get hold of Swiss Francs."

At the door he stopped and turned. "Come and see me again, Mr. Maasten," he said. He permitted himself a tight smile. "There are times when we bankers have to use our discretion. Times when a too rigid application of the law might cause hardship."

I stiffened. Stofel was fishing for something.

Something about de Maerez. But Stofel couldn't conceivably be interested in the sale of the stamps.

"I know what you are saying," I said.

"Good," Stofel replied. "Then come and see me again."

I picked the cheque off the table and smiled at him. "Meanwhile, I had better keep the cheque. To prove against the Marques's estate."

13

I RETURNED TO the hotel and tried the Marquesa's room. She was out. I went up to my room, threw off my jacket, loosened my tie, lay down on the bed and tried to think. My thinking took all of ten minutes. All that did was to clarify the problem.

It had been all to easy for me to sound confident about proving the debt against de Maerez estate. The cheque had been signed with a number, and I had little doubt that the administration of that part of de Maerez estate would lie with the bank. And being Swiss, the bank would be discreet and very thorough.

They would follow de Maerez's instructions to the letter and they would do their utmost to preserve the estate. They would ask questions. Stamps, Mr. Maasten, and where are those stamps now? Stolen, you say. No doubt you have a bill of sale, evidence of the transaction. A receipt? These documents are after all customary in transactions of this nature are they not? We are sorry, Mr. Maasten, your story is somewhat unusual. A polite smile. Your story, you must admit, is somewhat incredible.

That is, even if they admitted to knowing what I was talking about. Bank secrecy has numerous advantages. It also makes Swiss banks a law unto themselves in matters of this nature.

At best the whole thing could take months to sort out. At worst, there would be this impenetrable wall of discretion and secrecy. In any case, even if everything went smoothly I wasn't sure that I trusted Legermann or Stofel one paltry inch.

There seemed to be no alternative. If I wanted to save my investment I would have to find the people who ambushed de Maerez. There could be no question of leaving that to the police. Our interests were different. The police wanted to solve a crime.

I, on the other hand, wanted the return of property that rightfully belonged to me, and to the police this would always be incidental to the de Maerez killing.

I poured myself a large brandy and lay down on the candlewick bedspread. The boxy little hotel room was beginning to look even more anonymous and inhospitable, the sailing prints on the walls even more dreary.

I had only one advantage. As long as I knew who de Maerez's killers were and the police didn't, they would have to come to a satisfactory arrangement with me over the stamps.

Why de Maerez had been killed, had nothing to do with me. The answer lay in his past. What was more significant was the fact that de Maerez had expected to die violently. That expectation had been so strong that he had hired one of Europe's best gunmen to protect him from this realisation.

I began to wonder why Lladlo Hasek had left de Maerez and where Lladlo Hasek was now.

* * *

I went down to the hotel bar at precisely six o'clock. The man I was due to meet was already there, sitting up at one end of the deserted bar counter. There was a large Martini in front of him and he was staring into the mirror above the bottles with eyes that were large and blue and innocent.

He saw me in the mirror and swivelled round on the bar stool.

"Nicholas! It's good to see you!"

We clasped hands and I said, "How are you, Elmer? Have another Martini," and snapped my fingers at the barman.

I had known Elmer Robey ever since he began looking after the legal affairs of Air Chartel. The affairs of Air Chartel then were quite as convoluted as they were now. Elmer was glad to have the help of someone who, as he put it, gave him the story without frills and then left him to worry about what legal subterfuges were necessary. I knew that Elmer now administered all of Air Chartel and that his law practice had grown to a lot more than a tax shell for expatriate Americans.

"Been in an accident, Nicholas?" he asked.

"Car smash."

Elmer sighed. "You always were careless," he said, as if remembering the C-47 at the bottom of Lake Lammeray.

I passed the Martini across to him. "This time," I grinned, "someone else was driving."

Elmer said, "Oh!"

He was hardly more than five foot and perched up on the high bar stool he looked like a jockey with short stirrups. As usual he was wearing a glen-checked tweed and also as usual, a polka-dot tie. He raised his glass and said seriously, "Here's mud in your eye, sir."

"Cheers," I said. Elmer still hadn't forgotten that he had once run a law practice in Ashville, New Jersey.

We drank.

I asked, "How's the flying business?"

"Slow," Elmer replied. "Slow."

We both looked at our drinks. I knew Elmer didn't rely on Air Chartel for a living. The important thing was that he knew that I knew that. We'd always had that kind of understanding.

"I am looking for a man," I said. "I need him for a job."

Elmer contemplated his drink. "Yes," he said. "What sort of job?"

"Security."

He drank. "That shouldn't be too difficult, sir."

"I want Lladlo Hasek," I said.

Elmer put his glass back on the bar. He picked out the cherry and popped it into his mouth. "You don't want Hasek," he said chewing. "He's past it. Over the hill." He stopped and looked around and picked the cherry from my whisky sour. "May I, sir?" I nodded and lit a cigarette.

"Hasek was one of the best," I said.

"So were you," Elmer said. "So were you."

He turned and looked me defiantly in the face. "You were a damn good pilot, sir."

I grinned. "And you are still a damn shrewd lawyer."

I ordered more drinks and we chatted desultorily about the old Air Chartel days.

"Hasek," I said, "where can I find him?"

"He is no use, Nicholas. The man is a lush. Look, I can get you five people who are better and faster and they don't drink."

"Since when has Hasek been a lush?"

Elmer shrugged. "Since he returned from Spain. When was it, about two months ago."

"Has he worked since he returned from Spain?"

"No, sir. He seems to have enough money to drink himself to death."

I finished my drink. "Where can I find him?" I asked.

Elmer studied me speculatively, then he scribbled down an address. "You had better go now," he said. "Later on he will be out, drinking."

"Thanks," I said and thrust some notes on the bar.

Elmer's innocent blue eyes looked into mine.

"Thanks," I said again. "You have been a real help."

Outside it had started to snow.

14

HASEK LIVED IN an unfashionable part of Zürich in a district scheduled for redevelopment, bounded by the railway line and immense subterranean earthworks fringed with rows of red lanterns like abandoned frontier posts.

The taxi stopped with a gritty scrape of brake drums.

"*Neunzehn,*" the driver said.

No. 19 was a sad-looking building with a tall wide door in the centre and boarded windows higher up. Plaster had stripped from the walls leaving winding gashes of exposed yellow brick work. Snow dripped from the window ledges.

"*Diese Addresse ist richtig, nicht wahr?*" the driver asked.

"*Ja,*" I said. "*Ja, Ja.*"

I paid the cab and got out. The door was closed and I fumbled looking for a bell.

The taxi driver tooted his horn. "*Gehen Sie nur hinein die Tür steht offen, die Tür steht immer offen.*

I gave him a small wave and pushed the door. He was right. It was open.

I stepped into a small courtyard. The entrance to the building was a dark, narrow stairway at the back. Hasek's name was engraved on a visiting card and slotted into the third orifice of the indicator by the door.

I went quickly up the bare stone stairs. Each landing was lit by a single naked light bulb that cast a feeble yellow glow. It was almost as if there was a war on. On each landing there were doors leading to two flats. The doors were firmly shut.

On the third landing I stopped at the name plates. Beside one of the doors the same engraved card was inserted into a thin brass holder, that had turned green with age and lack of polish.

There was a bell shaped like a woman's nipple by the side of the door. I pressed it.

It struck soundlessly.

Then I saw that that door too was open.

I stepped into a small lobby, that smelt of old clothing and dust. An over stuffed sofa was covered with books, files, letters and grimy paper. A coatstand was smothered under three heavy woollen coats, two hats and a dirty scarf. The mirror beside it was discoloured. The lobby was lit by a single lamp, its flex clothed with cobwebs, its shade brown with accumulated dust. The wall paper had been yellow a long time ago.

"Hasek!" I called. "Hasek."

I heard a scuffling from the back of the house and waited. Perhaps Hasek was not yet fully awake or completely recovered from his session of afternoon drinking. The floor beneath me vibrated and the light at the far end of the passage was slashed, broken into thundering shapes as a train flashed by.

I waited for the vibration and the rumbling to die down, for the flashing of light to stop.

"Hasek," I called again.

This time there was silence.

I went cautiously down the narrow corridor. It smelt of sour milk and small decaying furry bodies. Bundles of yellowing paper, old 78 records, were stacked by the side of the threadbare carpet. A curtain, stiff with dirt and grease separated the corridor from the bedroom. At the end of the corridor was the kitchen. A light was on there gleaming brightly off the rack of saucepans and china.

"Hasek," I cried and went in.

The room was tidier than the rest of the house. From one of the windows Hasek had an excellent view of a shunting yard.

But Hasek was not looking much. He was seated at the head of the long kitchen table, made of unpolished wood, its edges splotched with old food stains. Hasek was wearing a deep mauve dressing-gown and the yellow tassle of its sash dragged on to the harlequin patterned lino. His curly grey head lay on the table and the blood from the wound on his neck mingled with the runny yolk of his egg and clotted thickly over the congealed bacon.

I stepped closer, taking care not to touch anything. The knife had gone in just behind the jugular vein and whoever had used it had moved it in the wound like a saw. There was blood everywhere.

A train clattered past, slicing the room into long vertical flashes

of light. I closed my eyes feeling the floor vibrate. Hasek's head rolled slowly on the table and blood trickled off the edge and fell. The clatter of the train faded, died. It was then that I heard the stealthy slurp of a footstep.

I whirled, glimpsing the slim figure in the doorway, the dark ugly snout of the gun. In that situation there was only one thing to do. I kicked out at the gun. I kicked hard. I kicked high. My foot smashed into bone and flesh. Someone gasped. The gun jerked, cartwheeling into the air. I kept moving.

I came down on my feet, pivoted, slammed a vicious wheeling hook to the stomach. There was another gasp, deeper, this time, more explosive. I felt flesh fold round my fist and stepped back, hands hooking for jacket lapels.

My hands gripped wool, slipped, twisted, relaxed at the softness of the flesh underneath. I stopped, my hands loosely curved over her breast. I was looking into a woman's face, its shape distorted by a balaclava cap. The face was long and elfin-like, the wide mouth sagging open, sucking air. This time the eyes were closed. Underneath those lids I knew they were dark and the last time I had seen them they had been full of concern.

I let go and stepped away.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

She raised her hand in pitiful self-defence, then stabbed at the wall for balance. Her face was the colour of coffee when cream is added to it. There were tiny beads of sweat on her forehead. Her eyes were screwed shut and she made tiny puffing noises as she struggled to drag air into her lungs.

The gun had fallen under the kitchen table. I picked it up and put it into my pocket. The girl slid down the wall onto her haunches till she was squatting on the floor. She was still panting and wheezing, her chest heaving violently with the effort. I looked from her to Hasek.

Hasek had been nearly two hundred and ten pounds. It would have taken someone a good deal stronger than her to have stuck the knife into him and twisted it so viciously.

I turned back to her. "You found him like this?"

She nodded.

I reached down and helped her up off the floor. "Get up," I snapped. "We are leaving."

She folded round my arm light and fragile as a bird. The sensation was not unpleasant.

"Police?" she gasped.

I grinned down at her. "I never call the police," I said, and then I remembered. "Almost never."

I helped her out of the flat and as far as the first landing. She was still doubled up and looked very pale.

"Can you wait here until I get a taxi?"

She breathed deeply. "Car," she gasped. "Round corner," she whispered.

She gave me the keys, and indicated that I should drive.

15

WE HURRIED DOWN the street, arms locked around each other like lovers. The car was a Porsche Carrera, stub-tailed, brutish, ghost-like in the spread apart dimness of the street lamps. Two pairs of skis were fastened rakishly to its roof. Its tyre tracks, I noticed, were still fresh.

It started first time, the engine whoofing hoarsely through a battered exhaust. The wipers moved creakingly, crushing fat flakes of snow. I edged into the slushy road.

My hair felt damp, my fingers were like icicles. The heater began to chug out warm blasts of air. I drove cautiously along the dim lit street. The brakes were fierce and I knew these flat sixes could be real bitches in the wet. The last thing I wanted was to slide into a row of parked cars.

The girl asked: "Are we being followed?"

I glanced hurriedly at the rear view mirror. A heavy truck was wheezing its air brakes up our exhaust pipe.

I said: "I am too scared to go any faster. And there's no room for him to overtake."

"Turn down a side street," she suggested.

I did that before I saw the great winking amber eye in my mirror. She was leaning back against the padded Reuter seats, eyes closed, her hand gently massaging her stomach. The truck drew alongside with a harsh clatter and passed, throwing streams of glutinous muck over the windscreen.

"I am sorry I hurt you," I said, "I thought you were a man."

I began to drive away from the centre of Zürich, fighting against ribbons of streaming headlamps. The heater was turning the snow on our clothes to silver pinpoints. She had removed her balaclava helmet and her hair fell dark and straight and free.

"The name's Maasten," I said, "Nicholas Maasten."
Her name was Dael.
"Do you always," I enquired, "take a corpse on holiday?"
She said, "That isn't funny. I knew Hasek."
"Well?"
"No," she said. "I knew him slightly."
"I see. A sort of passed on acquaintance. Did you kill him?"
"He was dead when I got there."
"What were you going to see him about?"
"Something personal. He knew my family."
"The one in Marseilles?" I enquired.
She hesitated a moment before she said, "Yes."
We were following a queue of cars up a steep hill. We bounced over tram lines and hissed through a neon lit tunnel. On the further side of the tunnel the snow was still falling. She said: "I am alright, now. You can stop wherever it suits you."
"Fine," I said. "I'll do that."
Large hoardings loomed out of the fleecy darkness. We passed rows of square, industrial buildings, standing well back from the road, names etched out against the sky in letters of electric blue. The snow caught and swirled in the glare of the headlamps like a horde of fat white insects.
I said, "Why don't you tell me about it?"
"About what? Hasek?"
"That as well," I said. "First, tell me about de Maerez."
"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.
"If it wasn't for you," I said, "I might have bled to death in the accident."
"If that were true, and we were Chinese, I would own you. The Chinese believe that if you save a person's life then that life belongs to you."
"What about the Spanish?" I asked. "What do they believe?"
"I don't know Spain very well," she said.
"Why did you ambush de Maerez?" I asked.
"I don't know what you're talking about."
"I saw you," I said, "by the car."
"You're hallucinating," she said and looked at the plaster on my forehead. "It is not uncommon with head injuries. How did it happen?"
"I skidded," I said. "On a dry road."
We had reached the autoroute to Kloten. The Porsche re-

sponded eagerly as I trod on the accelerator. Spray streamed from rows of angry red tail-lights, and a car travelling fast on the opposite carriage way spattered us with slush.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Somewhere," I said, "where we can talk."

I turned off before the airport, braking hard for the long streaming corner at the exit and the illuminated restriction signs. We passed a sign saying 'Cargo' and drove along a narrow road, past a row of large, flat buildings, each proudly displaying the large lettering and jet stream symbols of the big airlines. Swiss Air, BOAC, KLM, BEA, Lufthansa, Pan Am. Another block of buildings housed the private outfits. BUA, Caledonian, Dan-Air. I drove past the buildings with their bright clean lighting and their atmosphere of turbine smooth efficiency. When the road ended, I turned on the headlamps and bumped over the thick, uneven carpets of snow to a hut near the wire netting which cordonned off the airfield. There were no brightly illuminated signs over the hut. Air Chartel couldn't afford the electricity.

The hut was still the centre of a two-year-old dispute between Air Chartel and the Swiss Airport Authority. It was unsightly, the Authority said, unhygenic and probably unsafe. It was cheap, Air Chartel replied, and the Authority had been glad to let it to Air Chartel before the new buildings were erected. But that was two years ago, the Authority pointed out. Since then the Airport had been developed and all air freight companies should be housed in the new buildings. Air Chartel replied that they had a lease and until that expired they would stay in their prefabricated hut. The Authority retaliated by refusing to extend the road to the hut. After all, they said, the road would be permanent and the hut, and hopefully Air Chartel, temporary.

I drove up to the wire mesh and brought the car around in a wide circle to the front of the hut. The light splayed over the familiar shape of an Air Chartel Dakota, fuselage and wings silvered with snow, its nose pointing hopefully at the sky. Someone with a sense of humour had painted the name 'Empress of Blandings', along the side of the cockpit. The 'Empress of Blandings' was Lord Emsworth's prize-winning sow.

I stopped the car, turned off the engine and put the ignition key in my pocket.

"It may not look much," I said pointing at the hut, "but its warm, and its quiet. If we're lucky we may even find a drink."

"I don't want a drink," Dael said.

"That's alright," I said and opened the door. A chilly blast of air swept through the car. "You can sit there and talk, or sit here and freeze."

She got out of the car. We hurried through the driving snow, up the steps to the hut.

The Swiss are an exceptionally honest race. You can leave an unlocked car almost anywhere in Switzerland and find it the next morning with its contents intact. It seemed highly likely therefore, that the people who used to break into Air Chartel's offices with such frequency, weren't Swiss. As these thieves did not seem interested in basic office equipment, Air Chartel took the sensible precaution of keeping anything that might be of interest to this type of thief elsewhere. Then, relying on natural Swiss honesty, they never replaced the broken locks.

The door opened to my touch. I pushed Dael in front of me and turned on the lights. The room came alive with a fluorescent flicker. It was exactly as I remembered it, wide, a ceiling you could bounce your head on, an untidy row of desks, the shrouded Smith Corona typewriter. Behind the desks was a row of unlocked, battered, gun metal filing cabinets. On the wall was a cutaway drawing of a C-47. And opposite this drawing to inspire the other younger pilots and show the older ones what they had missed out on, there was a cutaway drawing of a Boeing 707. The drawings were yellow at the edges and curling back from the tacks.

I went round the central desk, moved the dust covered model of a BOAC VC 10 in arrowed ascent, dumped the trayful of duplicated cargo forms on the floor, and sat down.

"Make yourself comfortable," I said to Dael.

She asked, "Are you a pilot?"

I ignored her. I was going to ask the questions.

I turned on the electric fan heater and reached behind me into the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. That was how I remembered it, too. I took out the bottle of Scotch and two tin tumblers.

"Drink this," I said. "It'll make you feel warm."

"I don't want a drink," Dael said. "I feel ill."

"Relax," I said, "you're going to feel a lot worse."

I took a long gulp of the Scotch, put the tumbler down and said, "Let's see your passport."

"Who are you? The police?"

"No," I said. "I'm just a guy the Spanish police would like to

frame for de Maerez's murder." I held out my hand. "Come on. Let's have that passport."

She took it out of the pocket of her anorak and placed it on the desk. She lit a cigarette while I studied the passport.

Dael had been born in Casablanca twenty years ago. The passport was an Israeli one, and was two years old. She had arrived at Barajas airport nine days before the de Maerez killing and had left the day after, crossing the frontier at Seo de Urgel. I returned the passport to her.

"Alright," I said, "three questions. What were you doing in de Maerez that day? Why were you so interested in the Marques? Why did you kill him?"

She looked directly into my face with those bold, dark eyes. "I know nothing," she said and drew deeply at her cigarette.

"If I were a Swiss policeman," I said, "I would have arrested you at Hasek's flat. If I were a Spanish policeman I'd have screamed for a Swiss policeman to hold you until I could get an extradition order." I took a sip of whisky. "Policemen are not allowed to drink on duty," I said. "I'm drinking." None of this seemed to have any effect on her. So I said: "I didn't tell the Spanish police about you."

"There's nothing to tell," she said. "You have been injured in an accident and are hallucinating. That is all. It cannot be of any interest to the Spanish police." She stood up. "Now if you'll give me the keys to the car, I would like to return to my hotel."

I laid a hand on the phone. "I could call the Swiss police and have you arrested."

"And how would you explain your presence in Hasek's flat? And the time we have spent since?"

"I wouldn't have to," I said. "I might just tell the Swiss police about de Maerez. And you might just end up talking to Señor Juan Mañuel Garcia. Señor Juan Mañuel Garcia is the respected Chief of Police of the district of de Maerez. His whole future depends on finding de Maerez's killers. Getting you will be the best thing that's happened to him, since his moustache grew."

She shrugged. "He'll never make the charge stick." She looked restlessly out of the window. "Go on," she said, "call the police or let me go."

I didn't like either of those suggestions. Police of any nationality could involve me in too many explanations, some of which might not be believed. All policemen are naturally suspicious.

In any case once the police got involved, I'd lose all hope of getting my stamps back. There was also the fact that Dael had not left me to bleed to death on the floor of the rock basin. I couldn't lightly hand her over to a man like Garcia, for any reason.

I said: "Once Garcia has got you, it will be quite easy for him to connect you with Jacob Horowitz."

She sat down. Her eyes burned into mine. "What do you know about Jacob Horowitz?" she asked.

For my sake, I was glad she lacked experience in interrogation. "Enough," I said. "I know that Horowitz was behind the de Maerez killing, that you worked for Horowitz and Cover 12."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Someone who is trying to get out from under. I promise you, I am not connected with any police force and that anything you say will go no further. For my own reasons I want the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

She lit a fresh cigarette. "Where is Jacob?" she asked.

I said, "In hospital in de Maerez."

"Hospital!"

I nodded. "The police think he was in a car accident."

"Oh God! Is he badly hurt?"

"Bad enough," I said. "I think he'll be in hospital for at least a week."

She sat very still for a while, thinking. The cigarette burnt to within an inch of her slender brown fingers.

"Horowitz is in Spain," I reminded her.

She picked up the pack from the desk and lit another cigarette from the butt of the first. Then she took the second tumbler of Scotch and sipped it.

"The killing was an accident," she said softly. "We wanted de Maerez alive."

16

"IT ALL STARTED fifteen days ago," Dael said. "I was with my unit in southern Galilee, when I heard that Colonel Raab wanted me."

"Colonel who?"

"Raab. You know him?"

I shook my head.

"He's a nice man," she said, "always laughing and full of jokes. You'll like him," she added hopefully.

"Go on," I said. "About de Maerez."

"Raab dresses terribly," she said, "especially for a man with his background." Her eyes took in my roll-neck mohair Jaeger and Lord John overcoat with lapels so wide that Al Capone himself could have hidden under them. That autumn, the thirties were in, or so hordes of slim, stripe-sweatered youths kept telling me.

"One shoulder of Raab's jacket is always higher than the other," Dael said. "And his trousers are rumpled up so that they look like the centre part of an accordion, you know the part that—"

"The bellows," I said.

"Bellows," she said. "He is always losing buttons, and always there are little wisps of thread on his cuffs and his shirtfront. His shirt is always open and you could see the fat on his little, sweaty chest. His—"

"Alright," I snapped. "Let's elect him playmate of the month and tell me about de Maerez."

"Raab used to be a tailor in Kiev," Dael said. "That's why his style of dressing is so strange."

"What the hell has Raab got to do with all this?"

Dael shrugged and looked down at the table. "I thought you'd like to hear it from the beginning," she said. "That's more logical."

"Alright," I said. "Tell it like it happened. But enough of Raab."

"I had to hitch hike all the way to Tel Aviv," Dael said. "It wasn't easy."

"It never is," I said.

"In fact, I would never have got to Raab's office in time if it were not for the American."

"The American?"

Dael smiled fondly. "He was a nice boy," she said. "He had spent a few months working on a Kibbutz near Rosh Pinna, and now he was touring Israel before going back home. His parents lived in New York. They own a chain of delicatessens."

"Great," I said, "super. Maybe one day he'll even become a doctor. Now what's *he* got to do with de Maerez?"

"Nicholas," she said. "You're impatient. It was because of this nice American boy that I got to Tel Aviv on time. He picked me up near Nazareth, and we drove straight through. He had a lovely car. A Ford Mustang."

I felt the odd quiver of jealousy, but not because of the Mustang. "They're too big for Israeli roads," I said.

"They're not!" Dael replied, heatedly. "Israeli roads have taken tanks and armoured cars. They're more than wide enough for any American car."

"Alright," I said, "there are wide roads in Israel. Now will you—"

"They are finely engineered too," Dael said. "I once worked near Latrun—"

"Dael," I said, "the story. Get on with it. The American took you straight to Tel Aviv."

"Was that important?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Set against the grand happening of the universe, I suppose it wasn't."

"He was a nice boy," Dael said.

"You've said that before. Now what happened in Tel Aviv?"

"I thought you were not interested in whether we drove straight there or not."

"Did you?"

"Yes," Dael said. She looked down at the table and smiled.

I took a large pull at the Scotch. "What happened in Tel Aviv," I asked.

"The nice American boy dropped me right in front of Raab's office, in the Yehuda Halevi. I was actually twenty minutes early."

"What then?"

"I stood on some files and looked at the sea."

"You did what?"

"Raab's office is on the fifth floor. From one window you can look directly at the radio aerial over the police station. From the other, if you stand on some files, you can look at the sea."

"Why stand on files?" I asked. "Why not stand on a chair?"

"Because the files are on top of the chairs. In Raab's office there are files everywhere, on the floor, on the desks, under the typewriters, behind the door."

"Hasn't he heard of filing cabinets?" I asked.

"They're full," she said. "So I selected some of the largest files, stood on them and looked at the sea. The sea front in Tel Aviv is very beautiful. It runs behind the big hotels, the Sheraton, the Hilton, the Dan—"

"Alright," I said. "Forget the package tour. Tell me about de Maerez."

"Raab came in exactly on time. He apologised for not being able to send a jeep for me. 'As always,' he said, 'we are short of resources.'

"I told him that it was of little consequence and that I had arrived early.

"Raab began to ask me questions about my unit, and what manoeuvres we'd done. I had an idea that he was waiting for someone, or something, but all the same I felt honoured. It was only the second time I had met Colonel Raab and I was flattered that he was taking such an interest in my work."

"Work?"

"In the army," she said. "I stayed on after conscription and I want very much to please my superiors."

"Dael," I said, "who was Raab waiting for?"

"I am only telling you like it happened," she said.

"Sure," I said and mimicking her: "That's logical." It *was* logical. Logical, like a vixen.

"Raab was waiting for Ashraf," she said.

I realised now why Dael was being so tiresomely cooperative

She was counting on enthusiastic willingness to ensure Jacob's safety. At the same time she was filling me with so much useless detail that really she was telling me nothing at all. I wondered if there was a Colonel Raab.

"Ashraf and I joined the section together," she said. "His family lived near us in Tel Aviv, and from time to time when we were on leave together, we used to meet and exchange experiences. Lately, I had heard, that Ashraf had been stationed on the Jordanian Border, taking part in reprisal raids on the Palestinian guerrillas."

"Go on," I said. Gradually I was beginning to understand that the whole and entire truth I had so pompously demanded, was becoming less important. The reason why de Maerez was killed was not the main object. The recovery of my stamps was.

I decided to let Dael tell the story in her own way. If I did that, I thought, she would be more likely to let slip some clue as to where the stamps were.

* * *

"Ashraf was at Kasseima," she said. "His whole group was killed there, except him. That day, at Raab's office, Ashraf looked very tense, and there were lines of strain around his face and his eyes. His eyes had a peculiar deadness, that I found frightening, and for the first time since I had left Galilee I began to be worried.

'Why have you sent for us?' I asked Raab.

Raab laughed. 'To send you on holiday. A boy and a girl together. That will be nice, no?'

I was thinking that he hadn't even been able to send a jeep for

[redacted]

The phlegm caught in Raab's throat and he began to cough. 'You are going to Spain,' he said. 'I am sending you to Horowitz.' He thought that was funny, too.

I felt exultant. Being sent for by Raab was one thing, but working for Horowitz was – fantastic!

'I thought you'd like it,' Raab said quietly.

I had to show him I was worthy of the honour that had been given to me so I asked: 'What do we have to do?'

'I think,' Raab said, 'you have to get someone.'

That worried me even more. If someone had to be got, they

would normally send men. There was no reason for picking me unless—I looked across at Ashraf. Ashraf was very tense, almost unaware of where he was. He looked like a sleepwalker. He seemed to be stretched beyond endurance. At that moment, I felt that something awful would happen.

They were sending me, I thought, because if there were problems with Ashraf, I would be able to handle him better than a man. It was what they called the psychological approach.

Raab was saying: 'No. No guns. Not yet.' For once he did not laugh.

'Why are you sending us to Spain?' I asked. 'Why Ashraf and me?'

Raab spread his short arms wide open, as if he would have liked to have embraced both of us. 'What better cover?' he laughed. 'A boy and a girl on holiday, in Spain.'

You know, Nicholas, that was not the only reason. Ashraf and I are both Sephardic. We both speak Ladino which is very close to Spanish. If anything went wrong, they hoped that we would be able to pass ourselves off as Spaniards. I felt they were really expecting something to go wrong."

"What happened next?" I asked.

"Raab smiled. 'You leave for Frankfurt in two hours. There you will await instructions.'

As usual, Ashraf was impatient. 'How long do we wait?' Raab kept on smiling. 'That depends on Horowitz. This is entirely his affair.'

'What should we take with us?' I asked. Raab laughed again. 'Your clothes. Holiday things. You're very lucky to be going on holiday at this time of the year.'

We stayed in Frankfurt for four days. It was very trying. For four whole days we had no word from anyone. We walked everywhere and saw everything, the medieval streets around the Altstadt, the Romerberg and the Senckenberg Museum. We looked at the new skyscrapers and the rebuilt churches. We saw the Eschenheimer Tor and the wholesale market halls. Every three hours we used to return to the hotel, and every three hours it was the same. 'No message, sir, I'm sorry. No message, madam.'

Once we went to the Port and watched the tugs darting up the River Main, like little dogs. We went to Goethe's birthplace. Ashraf didn't like it."

"Why?" I asked.

"Ashraf doesn't like Germans," Dael replied, "Ashraf says the only good Germans are dead ones. But I took no notice. I like Goethe and sometimes Ashraf talks like an uneducated Arab."

"Horowitz met us in Madrid and drove us down to the south. He was very professional and very organised. He made us drive five times over the route de Maerez would take and he made us spend a whole afternoon on the hillside. From where we were, we had a splendid view of the whole basin and we could see anyone coming up to three miles away." She paused. "Jacob even had a Winchester for Ashraf."

She stopped and held out the tumbler. I filled it. She drank.

"We waited a long time for you on that hillside," she said. "The dust was creeping through our clothes, mingling with our perspiration. The binoculars cut into our eyes. We were very thirsty and the sun felt very hot. You were the first problem. We'd been expecting de Maerez to come alone."

"How did you know about de Maerez going to Switzerland that day?"

"We had someone watching the gas station. The Mercedes was serviced and filled later the previous evening. The chauffeur was garrulous." She paused. "All we wanted to do was stop the car and kidnap de Maerez," she said.

"What would you have done with me?"

"I suppose we would have had to kidnap you too. We would have kept you until we found out if you could be trusted."

"Thanks," I said drily.

"But de Maerez was driving too fast. And he didn't stop for the barrels."

"No," I said, "the glint of your binoculars frightened him."

"Ashraf aimed for the tyre," she said. "We didn't want to kill him."

"No?"

"De Maerez meant much more to us alive."

"You said that before. Why?"

"Do you know who de Maerez really was?"

I shook my head. "Tell me."

"De Maerez's real name was Gerhardt Niefeld. He was Deputy Direktor of the Berlin Sector of the Nazi Party."

"What would you have done to him?" I asked. "Give him a show trial, like Eichmann's?"

She shook her head sadly: "You don't understand do you," she said, "what the Nazis did to the Jews?"

* * *

I leaned back in my chair. "I'll tell you something," I said, "Jacob wasn't in a car smash. He was beaten up at de Maerez's funeral."

Dael closed her eyes as if in pain. "Oh God!" she cried. "Poor Jacob! Poor foolish, noble Jacob!" She looked at me. "He had been hunting Niefeld for twelve years," she said. "I suppose he had to make himself believe the search was really over."

"Perhaps," I said. "Was it Hasek who told you the route de Maerez would take?"

She nodded. "Hasek has worked for us for some time. He was looking to us for his pension."

"And tonight?"

"We wanted news of Jacob." She lit a cigarette. "We hadn't heard from Jacob since we left Spain."

There was a blandness in her expression that could have been fatigue, or shock, or even the camouflage of a lie. I decided to leave her alone. Most of what Dael had told me had sounded true. If I could get my stamps back, there was no reason for me to get involved in a dead war.

Dael looked round the office. "Are you a pilot?" she asked.

"I was."

"And now?"

"Now I collect stamps."

"Hasek didn't," she said. "Why did you want to talk to him?"

"About de Maerez," I said. "I wanted to get de Maerez's briefcase back."

"Oh," she said. Suddenly, unmistakably, there was a new wariness about her. I watched her fingers rolling the end of the cigarette against the ashtray.

"My stamps were in that briefcase," I said.

"Is that all?" Her voice was low, the tension breaking through.

"All! That's enough! Those stamps were worth six thousand pounds. That was what de Maerez paid for them."

"And you want to sell them again?"

"Yes," I said. "Because the bank knows de Maerez is dead and they won't meet his cheque."

"Oh," she said. "I see." The coolness was coming back now and I could see her trying to formulate the next question. "You have a cheque from de Maerez?"

I nodded.

"Drawn on which bank?"

"It is a numbered account," I said.

"Which bank?"

I let the question hang there while I lit another cigarette.

The intensity went out of her voice. "There was something he had to give back," she said. "Something that was not his."

"And now you want to know the name of his bank?"

She nodded.

"I'll sell you the cheque for fifty thousand Swiss francs. There is ten thousand francs in it for you."

"You are mad," she said. "We'd rather give you the stamps."

17

So that was how later that night we happened to be driving away from Kloten. It had stopped snowing, but the air outside the car was knife-edged. Dael drove, handling the powerful car with much greater ease than I had.

"What are you doing in Switzerland?" I asked as we joined the autoroute and sped past the glaring arclamps and the tight, bright cluster of buildings, that was the passenger terminal.

"We were waiting for Jacob," she said. "There is something more we have to do." Her voice carried a special tone, as if she were a nun describing chastity.

"What do you have to do?"

She smiled. "It wouldn't concern you. It's nothing to do with stamps."

"Aren't you afraid," I asked, "that the people who beat up Jacob and killed Hasek will come after you?"

She said, "That is a fact of life. All we can do is to be ready for them."

She asked: "How did you find out about Hasek?"

"That was easy. You know how one thing leads to another."

I considered the advisability of warning her about Beck. But once she knew that Beck had been responsible for beating up Jacob, she would in all probability arrange to have Beck beaten up or even killed. Any attack on Beck would involve the Swiss Police and this would open other avenues. There would be the business of running intelligence operations on Swiss soil, the question of de Maerez's death, of Beck's relationship with the Marquesa and my own involvement with all of them. No, I reflected soberly, it was best to let sleeping Nazis lie. Dael would do nothing until Horowitz left Spain and Horowitz would deal

with Beck as he wanted to. By then, I thought hopefully, I would be out of Switzerland with my stamps.

Dael gave me a sideways glance. "I don't think you are only a stamp dealer," she said.

I laughed.

She leaned the car into a turn hands skimming the wheel, throttle gradually flooring open.

"I think you are a *momzer*," she said. "Nice, but still a *momzer*."

* * *

Her hotel was a few miles out of Zürich, past Kloten. It was a small unpretentious place, where the food was good and the beds comfortable. You made your phone calls from the bar. She took the stairs two at a time up to the second floor. I followed eagerly.

I followed as she hurried down the wide corridors, stopped and tapped at a door. I stood behind her smiling thinking there were possibilities. Definite possibilities. Then my thoughts of an amorous postscript to the handing over of the stamps disintegrated. A man opened the door.

He was very like her, with the same lean build, the same copper skin. He was wearing tight-fitting blue denim and every muscle on his body showed. His face was square, topped by a thatch of thick black curly hair. His eyes were dark and hostile.

"This is Ashraf," Dael said.

Ashraf stared suspiciously at me. "What kind of a smile is that?" he asked.

"Flash macs. You need a long raincoat to do it well."

Ashraf looked at me as if I was mad.

"Nicholas knows the name of the bank," Dael said excitedly.

It was only then that he let me into the room.

Almost at once Dael began talking to him rapidly in a language that sounded like Arabic but could have been Spanish. Once or twice I heard the name Hasek, and Jacob, and she gestured towards her stomach with a clenched fist. Ashraf glowered at me menacingly and she shouted at him and made him listen.

I saw a bottle of brandy on the table and helped myself to a drink. They were still talking when I had drunk the first one so I poured out a second and stretched out across the bed. I was still in perfect control. I could balance the glass of brandy on my stomach. I lay there thinking of the stamps and how I would have

to ask Arabella for a list of customers when I became aware of Ashraf standing over me. He was still glowering.

"You know the bank and account number?"

I grinned at him. "You have the stamps?"

Ashraf didn't grin back at me. "How did you find Hasek?"

I looked at the brandy. "I know people," I said. "And Hasek was well known."

"What kind of people?"

"Look," I said, "you are buying de Maerez's cheque, not me."

Dael said, "I think you can help us."

"After I get the stamps."

Ashraf picked at his teeth with a dead match. "What is it you really want? What was your friendship with de Maerez?"

I finished the brandy and sat up. "Stamps," I said. "Just bloody stamps."

Dael said, "It was Ashraf who carried you up to the road. Your life belongs to him too."

"Sure," I said. "Sure. But let's have the stamps, love."

Dael spoke to Ashraf rapidly in the language which I thought was Arabic. Ashraf went over to the wardrobe and got out the briefcase. He came over and laid it beside me on the bed. The case was unlocked.

Inside there was a pile of official looking documents. They looked like a list of share holdings. There were names written down one side and figures in various currencies on the other. The list was fifteen pages long. Underneath the list was a box of liver pills and a German edition of a Hercule Poirot story. There was no sign of the small wallet containing the stamps.

"It isn't here," I said.

"Describe it," Ashraf said.

"A black leather wallet with two red stamps in it. Do you want me to describe the stamps?"

Ashraf walked across to the bedside drawer and threw the wallet on to the bed.

"Ta," I said. But that was before I looked at the wallet.

The wallet was punctured with minuscule holes as if it had been sprayed with droplets of acid. The black powdery holes had gone through the leather on to the stamps.

"I had to shoot the lock," Ashraf explained. "To open the case."

I began to feel very sick.

I suppose I should have insured the stamps in the first place. But the formalities would have taken too long and besides neither the insurance company nor myself would have expected anyone to shoot at my stamps.

I stood up feeling very tired and very old.

"What about the bank?" Dael asked.

I gave her a disgusted look. "What's in it for me?" I asked.

Ashraf said, "I am sorry about your stamps. Were they worth much?"

"De Maerez paid sixty thousand Swiss francs for them."

"And that is what you have lost? Sixty thousand francs?"

"Isn't that enough?"

Ashraf picked up the documents from the briefcase and held them out in front of me. "Do you know the total value of these shares?"

"No," I said. "I wasn't looking."

Dael said, "Those shares are worth a hundred million Swiss francs, over ten million pounds in your currency."

"And it was all de Maerez's," I said in amazement.

"It can be ours," Ashraf said.

* * *

Dael poured out more brandy. Ashraf and I sat side by side on the bed while Dael folded gaminely on the fitted carpet.

"You can make a great deal of money," Ashraf said. "You can be rich."

I didn't say anything. I was thinking that when people offer you a great deal of money they usually want you to do something completely illegal.

"Hasek was in for one per cent," Dael said. "One hundred thousand pounds in your currency."

One hundred thousand pounds *was* a lot of money, enough to live on comfortably for ten years. Then I remembered what had happened to Hasek.

"No," I said. "I don't want to be rich."

"There may be more than one hundred thousand pounds," Ashraf said. "Depending on how much you can help us."

"You have friends," Dael said. "Contacts."

My head was starting to float with the first gentle waves of

inebriation. "It is all nonsense," I said. "The money is legally de Maerez's. And that is that."

"De Maerez stole that money," Dael said. "He extorted it from German Jews while he was Deputy Direktor of the Berlin Sector of the Nazi Party."

The brandy was giving me almost total recall. I could feel my brain stretching out like the tentacles of an octopus. I remembered the name, Gerhardt Niefeld and much more besides. I remembered that secret time when I had worked for the Department, I remembered Carruthers. There had been a file on Niefeld in the Department.

Since 1941 the Berlin Sector had controlled the Party's share in all legislation in Nazi Germany. No legislation could be initiated unless it had been approved by the Party and this meant approved by the Berlin Sector. Bormann had headed the Berlin Sector, and directly underneath him had been Rudolf Steinmeyer and Gerhardt Niefeld.

The file referred to extortion of money from German Jews. The confiscation of their property as the price for allowing them to emigrate as stateless persons.

Bormann, Steinmeyer, Niefeld, they had all disappeared in 1945. Steinmeyer was presumed killed when an Allied bomb scored a direct hit on his house in the last days of the Berlin raids. Bormann and Niefeld had not been heard of since April 1945. The file hinted strongly that shortly before the end substantial funds had been moved out of Germany to finance a government in exile.

Carruthers had seen me reading the file. It didn't have anything more than a confidential classification. "Pipe dreams, old boy," he said in the same tone that he had asked me "can you use a gun?" Now he said, "No more than pipe dreams. If we had one fifth of all the Nazi money in our files this country could go back onto the gold standard."

He took the file away from me. During the rest of the time I had worked for the Department I never saw it again.

"It all happened too long ago," I said. "I don't see what you can do about it now." Remembering Carruthers had brought a sour taste to the back of my throat. I drank more brandy. "The money now legally belongs to de Maerez's legatees." I was thinking that this meant the Marquesa.

"A thief does not acquire any stronger rights by the passage of

time," Ashraf said. "This money belongs to the people from whom it was taken. And the State of Israel."

I shook my head slowly. "You will never find those people now. In any case, in 1945 there was no Israel."

"Not so," Dael said her gaze fixed unwinkingly on my face. "Israel has existed for more than two thousand years. Wherever there was a Jew, there was Israel."

"What about the true owners of the money?"

"We have records," she said confidently. "We will find them."

Ashraf topped up my glass. "Will you help us?"

"Please," Dael said.

I got a cigarette going. "What do you want me to do?"

Ashraf said, "First give us the cheque."

"Go on," I said.

"Then we will find a good lawyer, who will draw up a document authorising the bank to give us a list of all de Maerez's assets. The document will be signed in accordance with de Maerez's numbered signature."

"And then?"

Dael said seriously. "Then we need an aeroplane." She smiled up at me. "An aeroplane big enough to take three people and a pilot." She kept smiling at me and said: "We need a flying *momzer*."

I swallowed my drink quickly. The pleasure in her voice was embarrassing. I was concerned that it might become contagious. "What do you need a plane for?" I asked.

"To get away," Ashraf said, "after we have robbed the bank."

The brandy hit my stomach in a hot wave. Tears sprang to my eyes and my brain felt as if it were being rocked on soft rubber pads. I thought Ashraf had said we were going to rob a bank.

"You see," Ashraf was saying, "it is really quite simple. When you open a numbered account in a bank everything belonging to you, safe deposits, everything, is given a number. Once the bank has given us a list of what they hold when we break in we will know exactly what to look for."

It wasn't, I thought, appropriate to tell him that I had experience in breaking safes. Instead I said, "There hasn't been a bank robbery in Switzerland for thirty years."

"That's good," Dael cried. "Their security will be lax."

I stood up. The room tilted. Ashraf caught my arm.

"Tell us the name of the bank," Dael pleaded. "To show good faith."

"Tomorrow," I said. "I will call you. I promise." I had to work out a price for the information I had and a way of insuring that I got paid. I was much too tired and much too drunk to think clearly then.

Ashraf said, "You can have more. Five per cent, perhaps ten. A million pounds."

"You are mad," I said. "Completely mad and almost completely innocent."

18

I PAID OFF the taxi and weaved through the lobby of the hotel. The light reflecting off the gilt mirrors, flowing over the plush furniture looked unnaturally bright. I took my key from an impassive concierge and tottered past the desk to the lift. The figure 10,000,000 was revolving slowly round my brain like a giant wheel at a fairground.

The lift doors were open. I stepped into harsh metallic light that sent a stab of pain shooting through my head. I closed my eyes.

"Good evening, Mr. Maasten," said the Marquesa Teresa Maria Dona Almeida de Maerez.

I didn't know what to say. After all it was her money I was thinking about.

The lift surged upwards. My stomach rose to meet my brain. The Marquesa was looking strangely at me.

I forced a smile. "Hello," I said.

I had an awkward feeling that I was intruding. There was another man in the lift, a tall pear-bellied individual with a face like a used dish rag and shoulders like a collapsing tent. The face had an expression of petulant amiability and that was rapidly disappearing as he stared at me.

"How are you, Mr. Maasten?" the Marquesa asked.

I never know what to answer to that kind of question. "Well," I said hopefully.

"Recovered from the accident?"

"Oh yes."

"I am glad to hear that," she said quietly.

We moved upwards with a quiet hum of electric machinery.

"Hi!" I said to the other man in the lift.

He didn't say anything.

The Marquesa looked at the strip of numbers flashing above the door. She was holding herself very erect and there was an abstracted look on her face. I thought she looked pale, even a little frightened.

"Are you staying in Zürich long, Mr. Maasten?" she asked, still looking at the illuminated numbers.

"A few days."

"Buying stamps?" She was looking at me now.

"Amongst other things."

The lift stopped with a jar that rocked my head. The doors rolled open. The Marquesa was still staring at me, and there was a pleading look in her eyes which fixed on the bulge in my pocket caused by Dael's gun. Her companion was also looking at the gun.

All trace of amiability had gone.

"Mr. Maasten," the Marquesa said, "would you like to join me for a drink?"

The man in the lift stepped forward and stopped. He was looking at me as if he was trying to remember which particular stone I'd crawled out from. "Cheri-bye," I said and then to the Marquesa: "What a lovely idea."

The man made to move after us. I got a whiff of mint and muscat wine. "*Hasta la vista,*" he said before the lift doors shut, "Till we meet again."

The corridor was dim lit and empty, lined with oak chests and crossed flintlocks. A bronze Chinese wine jar stood in an alcove at the end. There were heavy doors like blinded sentinels. The hum of the lift faded. I followed the Marquesa.

"Where the hell have you been, Nicholas?" she demanded.

"Oh!" I said. "Out. You said I was to amuse myself."

"But not for the whole evening, Nicholas! I wasn't expecting you to leave me alone to be threatened by Beck." She stopped at the door and slammed the key into the lock. "You smell like a wine cellar," she said and opened the door.

She turned the light on and shut the door behind us.

"Was that Beck with you in the lift?" I asked.

"Who else?"

"What did he have to say for himself?"

She clicked the gold Dunhill impatiently and lit a cigarette. "He was more polite this time," she said, blowing out a stream of smoke. "He offered me ten per cent of the proceeds if I would

hand the shares over to him." She walked to the middle of the room and stared out of the darkened window. "I told him I would think about it."

She wheeled to face me. "Nicholas," she cried, "did you have to step into the lift at that moment?"

"No," I said. "I could have walked up three flights of stairs. Although in my condition, I might not have made it."

She stubbed the cigarette out angrily. "You're drunk!" she said, disgustedly. "This is really all I need! A drunken bodyguard!"

I agreed with her and sat down. That way only the room kept moving.

The Marquesa asked, "I wonder whether Beck guessed that you were working for me?"

"No," I said with drunken clarity. "He couldn't. We sounded like casual acquaintances. Besides," I said, "I don't even look like a bodyguard."

The Marquesa stared at me. "Nicholas," she asked tightly, "what the hell are you doing with two guns in your pockets?"

I let the alcohol flow over me in waves of slow thunder. "There's safety in numbers," I said, quietly.

She came up to me and thrust her hand in front of my face. "How many?" she asked.

I looked at her outspread fingers. "Four," I said.

"Alright," she said, "as long as you can see straight we're going to Austria."

"Austria?" I asked. I was sure she'd said Austria. "But that's miles away."

"I am aware of that."

"You don't mean you are going to Austria now?"

"Give me ten minutes to get changed," she said and walked to the bedroom door. She stopped and turned, "I would suggest, Nicholas," she said, "that you dump your head in a bucket of ice cold water. It will make you feel better."

"I am thinking of resigning," I said, but she'd already shut the bedroom door. I turned around and made a face at the imitation Turnbull. Ice cold water indeed. You could die of pneumonia, that way.

* * *

She came out of the bedroom ten minutes later. She had removed the heavy Ninotchka overcoat and the brocaded, high-necked evening dress she had been wearing earlier. Her face had been scrubbed free of make-up and her hair hung loose, flowing down to her shoulders. She was wearing a belted tunic in ribbed wool, black flared pants, and ankle-length, fur-lined boots.

"Ready?" she demanded.

"Does Beck know where we are going?" I asked, still sitting.

"If he does," she said, "you can handle him."

I still didn't move. I didn't feel in the least inclined for a shoot out with Beck's hoodlums. Given time, I thought, I could find a suitable replacement for me.

"Look," I said, "tomorrow—"

The Marquesa looked at me steely-eyed. She was stuffing keys and purse and lipstick and powder compact into her handbag which was large enough to hold the Taj Mahal. "I hope you aren't thinking of letting me go to Austria alone, Nicholas."

"No," I said, "I was thinking we could go tomorrow. After all in daylight—"

"Nicholas," she said, "I would hate to tell Señor Garcia I was wrong in my impression of you. I would hate to tell him that due to grief and shock, my recollection of what happened the evening before my husband's death was faulty."

"He couldn't get me back to Spain now," I muttered. "And if he did, he couldn't make a murder charge stick."

"He doesn't have to," the Marquesa said. "All he has to do is get you back to Spain. Before he can release you, he will question you. Interrogation by the Guardia Civil can take a long time." She picked up the handbag and walked to the door. "I am told it can be very painful," she said.

I got to my feet. "Alright," I said, "you've convinced me. But after Austria, you'd do better to employ someone more professional."

"After Austria," she said over her shoulder, "I may not need anyone."

* * *

We picked up the Alfa from the hotel car park and in no time at all were speeding out of Zürich. The Marquesa drove. Soon we were twisting round the hairpins before Winterthur and heading for the autoroute to St. Gallen.

"I had dinner with Herr Legermann," she said and my present alcoholic lethargy went. I fidgeted the seat two notches upright and looked at her.

"Apparently, he had been in his office all day," the Marquesa said sweetly.

"Bloody telephone operators!" I cried. "They don't know whether they're coming or going."

"Bloody Englishmen," the Marquesa said, "who can't speak proper German."

With a deep-throated growl from the exhaust, she nipped smartly past a Volkswagen that was overtaking an even slower Volkswagen.

"Herr Legermann was most charming," she said, dropping down into fifth gear. "He was very helpful."

"He would be," I said. An operator like Rudi Legermann was always trying to get one hand into your wallet, and I suppose, in the Marquesa's case, the other hand into her knickers.

"After dinner, he took me back to the bank."

"Nice," I said.

"So that we could discuss my husband's financial affairs." The Marquesa lit a cigarette off the dashboard lighter.

"Rudi showed me everything to do with my husband's business affairs. As you know, Nicholas, my husband was a wealthy man. An extremely wealthy man."

I nodded. I knew precisely how wealthy de Maerez had been.

"Yet, so far, I have not been able to find any of his money. There are traces, insubstantial amounts in banks in Spain, but no trace of all his investments. I assumed, quite naturally, that the bulk of his money and investments would be with Legermann & Cie, here in Zürich. I assumed that he would have left a will or at least some instructions with his bank."

"Didn't he?"

"He did. He left me all his money at Legermann & Cie and the deed to a ski hut in Austria."

"There you are," I said.

"Nicholas," she said, "the funds at Legermann & Cie were no more than 50,000 francs."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "he gave some of it away. To his family, or to his friends."

"I was all the family he had."

"Perhaps the bank made a mistake?"

"I doubt it. Rudi Legermann showed me a statement of his account with them and I myself opened the safe deposit. Everything he had at Legermann & Cie was accounted for."

I knew that couldn't be true. When de Maerez had died he had been carrying a share portfolio worth ten million pounds. "There must be something wrong," I said.

"There is," she agreed. "The bank didn't know anything about Odessa."

We had reached the autoroute section and she gunned the car up to one hundred and fifty kilometres per hour. Victor Sylvester-type strict tempo music flooded the car radio, punctuated by announcements in German.

"Bodenroche," the Marquesa said. "That is the name of the village where the ski hut is."

"Why do you want to go to the ski hut at this time of the night?"

"Because I want to get there before Beck learns about it. I think Alfonso was trying to tell me something. You might think I'm silly, Nicholas, but why else should he give me the deed to a ski hut that we never used in all the years we were married?" She shrugged. "I didn't even know he owned it."

"Surely if he had something he wanted you to have, he'd have left it with the bank?"

"Alfonso never believed in leaving all his eggs in one basket," she said, "besides, he didn't trust Legermann & Cie, especially after the older Legermann retired."

The Marques de Maerez was very wise, I reflected. I moved the seat further back and watched the road streaming under the headlamps. At some point I fell asleep. I woke only once, when we crossed the Austrian border.

19

We reached the ski hut about four hours after we had left Zürich. The track that led up to it was rock hard with ice and the Alfa snaked and slithered like a runaway bob sleigh. The hut was in total darkness.

"Are you sure this is the place?" I asked.

"We'll soon know," the Marquesa replied. "If we're wrong the keys won't fit."

Below us the mountains fell away in a steep angled slope, broken by clumps of trees that looked like gnarled shadows against the snow. At the bottom of the mountain was the lake, a gleaming black mass, merging into the night. Across from us Bodenroche was a daisy chain of street lamps, pimpling across the hill.

I got out of the car and stretched, my mouth stale with sleep. The Marquesa was already sloughing through the ankle-deep snow to the hut. I followed.

Actually it was more than a hut. It had a bedroom, a lounge and kitchen with a square pinewood dining table. There was also a little porch at the entrance, where if the weather was good, you could sunbathe. The hut was furnished in a comfortable peasant style, solid-looking sofas and chairs in dark wood and plenty of musty cushions. There was an ancient dresser in the living room that looked as if it had been fashioned by a blacksmith. There was a grandfather clock in the kitchen. It was just what you would have expected to find except that the door was mortise locked and the windows barred and screwed shut.

The hut was empty.

I said: "It's the skiing season. Shouldn't this be let?"

The Marquesa looked at me irritatedly. "Don't be tiresome, Nicholas," she said. "Let's start looking."

* * *

We looked everywhere. We moved furniture into the centre of each room, we tapped the walls, we cut open the cushions, we cleaned out the fireplace, we pulled up every single floorboard that was loose. Finally we broke up the bed. We found nothing.

"He must have wanted you to use this place," I said, "for holidays and such."

"We never used it before. Why now?"

I turned away and looked despairingly round the lounge. "We've looked everywhere," I said, "moved everything."

"Except the kitchen sink."

The kitchen sink was only a kitchen sink. I knew because I chipped the enamel with a screwdriver.

I lit a cigarette and looked at the snow through the kitchen window. "There's nothing here," I said. "I'm sure of it."

"If that is so," the Marquesa said quietly, "why does the fridge stand on castors?"

The fridge stood on castors by the door leading to the lounge. It was one of those small cupboard type efforts designed to run on paraffin. The interior was bone dry and it was as empty as last year's Xmas. It didn't take much effort to wheel it away.

The wall behind it was paler in colour, the outline of the fridge marked clearly by a rectangle of dust. In the centre of the bared wall was a wooden panel fastened by four shiny screws. It looked like an access panel to the piping or electrical wires. I half closed the lounge door, knelt behind it and took off the screws. As I expected there was piping and wires behind it. There was also a safe that dated back to the days when fireproof safes were a novelty.

"I suppose he didn't tell you the combination?" I said tiredly.

She shook her head. There was a rim of sweat above her upper lip and bright excitement in her eyes.

I studied the safe for a while, trying to remember what I had learnt about safe breaking in the days when I had worked for Carruthers and the Department. The safe was even older than the ones we'd had to practise on. I was willing to bet that it wasn't even powder proof.

Blowing a safe is a quite simple operation if you have the right equipment. You stuff the lock with the right amount of jelly, fit your detonating caps, fuse it and Whoom!

It's rather different without the jelly.

I took Dael's gun out of my pocket and extracted three of the cartridges. They were worn looking .30 mausers, soft nosed, vicious little brutes, with a muzzle rating of nearly 380 foot pounds. I split them open. I mixed the powder with kitchen soap and syphoned the rest into the lock. Now if it detonated and the wad of soap didn't fly in my face, I'd have an open safe. Unless of course I'd used too much powder, in which case the safe wouldn't be worth opening.

I found a coil of wire amongst de Maerez's extensive stores and rigged up a lead from the lounge light to the safe.

"Are you sure it's alright?" the Marquesa asked.

"I'm sure," I said. There was no point in both of us worrying. I turned the kitchen table on its side where it would act as a shield and asked the Marquesa to go into the lounge and shut the door.

"When I shout 'right' turn the light on."

"Will you be alright Nicholas?"

"I'll be fine."

I wanted a quick look at the contents of the safe alone.

"And don't come in until I ask you to."

After she went out I double-checked the lock and the wadding. Then I lay down behind the table, pulled my coat over my head and shouted "Right!"

There was an awful moment when nothing happened. Then there was a sharp snap followed by a bang. I counted ten and edged my head round the side of the table.

A wisp of smoke drifted from the safe. The safe door was sagging on its hinges. I went up and wrenched it open.

A black cap with the short peak and death's head emblem of the Gestapo topped a motley pile of photographs and letters, fat envelopes that looked as if they were stuffed with currency, old theatre programmes, an officer's swagger stick. There was a stamp album and a catalogue from the postal museum in Vaduz. There was also a thick bundle of share certificates and a small notebook.

I picked up the notebook and dropped it into my pocket. The stamp album was too big. I was standing there holding it when the Marquesa walked in.

"I was just looking," I said.

She ignored me and walked up to the safe. For what seemed like a full minute she stared at the cap and the souvenirs of the Third Reich. Then she said: "Nicholas, fetch me a bag."

She checked everything briefly before throwing them in. There was a photograph of Hitler and Eva Braun, a photograph of de Maerez in Nazi uniform, pictures of regimental dinners and a sepia toned family group. Each of the envelopes contained about 20,000 dollars in German, American and Swiss currencies. There was a stack of Belgian occupation money which she left in the safe together with the cap and the swagger stick.

She unrolled the bundle of share certificates. They were all first class equities in companies like Philips and General Motors and I.B.M. They all described the registered shareholder as Odessa Anstalt. Right in the middle of the bundle were two share certificates more ornate than the rest, heavily circumscribed with extravagant trefoils. These entitled the bearer to 666 Shares in Odessa Anstalt.

"That's it, Nicholas," the Marquesa said, "we've got what we came for."

She left the certificates out and put the rest in the bag with the money and the photographs. She took out one of the envelopes and counted $1,000.

"For you," she said. "In full and final settlement. Could I have the stamp album."

The stamp album wasn't worth much. The collection was of the kind a novice would have. Perhaps a few of the 1930 Germans would be worth something in a few years time, but as a collection it was worth no more than a few hundred pounds. I dropped the album into the bag.

"Thank you," she said.

For what it was worth I still had the notebook and the catalogue of the postal museum in Vaduz.

Part Four

20

April 1945

This is a time of betrayal and I write these lines so that if I am called upon to make the final sacrifice I will not be thought to have been one of the betrayers.

It is three days since I left Berlin and everywhere the roads are filled with refugees. I have not seen such a sight before. Long shambling queues of frightened people twisting endlessly along the roads, carrying their meagre possessions on their heads and over their shoulders, pushing carts and perambulators and bicycles. Everywhere there is hopelessness and defeat.

Travel is very slow and I have often had to wait behind columns of spent vehicles and infantry. The men are cheery but very tired.

I have slept little. Petrol is hard to obtain and there is a constant threat of bombing. At night the sky is lit by the white flashes of explosives and sometimes, in the distance, there is the faint red glow of a burning town. Last night the bombers flew over us, their engines throbbing deeply in the darkness over our heads. I dare not sleep. Even now with the immediate danger past, I dare not sleep.

I would rather have stayed in Berlin. It was from Berlin that we were to make the final breakout, the last great repulse of the War. No true German could wish to be elsewhere.

It was Steinmeyer who told me to go. When he told me what I had to take with me, I realised that the situation was far more serious than I had believed. We told each other we would meet after all this was over. In the event that we did not, I had certain instructions which I will carry out faithfully, if it is humanly possible for me to do so. My destination was Zürich and it was necessary that I should get there as soon as possible.

The car broke down near ——. I know very little about machinery. I

was told that the rear axle had seized up through lack of lubrication. Lately, even in Berlin, we have had difficulty in getting supplies. Some civilians assisted me in lifting the car to the side of the road.

I do not want to write too much where I am or where the car broke down. Those for whom I write will know the route I took and recognise the place when I say it is in Austria and that I walked three kilometres and a half to the Naval Research Station. Most of the refugees were going in the opposite direction and there were rumours that the Russians were approaching Vienna. The American Seventh Army was supposed to be behind us.

The Commandant of the Research Station was a Silesian and a singularly unhelpful fellow. He refused to lend me even a Kübelwagen or the few men I needed to transport the contents of the Mercedes to the Station. He said he had direct orders to destroy certain equipment so that it would not fall into Russian hands and he was too busy executing plans for the evacuation of the Station to help me. Even my warrant of authority did not make him waver from what he mistakenly saw as his duty. All he could do was lend me one man to blow up the Mercedes.

It was fortunate that this man was not a defeatist. He was himself a Berliner and anxious for news from the capital. I told him what was necessary about the significance of the Mercedes' contents, and he agreed to help.

Together we loaded the things from the Mercedes into his Schwimmwagen and drove back to the station. All around us was confusion, equipment and buildings were being blown up, and vehicles were scurrying outwards laden with boxes. I thought bitterly of how my own plans to return to Berlin afterwards or even to the Alpine bastion in the south were being frustrated.

After the personnel of the Station had left, we went down onto the lake and dropped our precious cargo overboard. We secured the cargo to a wreck using mine anchors to ensure that it stayed at the bottom.

Afterwards it was this man who introduced me to E——, the mayor of the town across the lake. We have remained hidden in the town for four days. The news has been bad. Berlin has been taken and the enemy are everywhere. Our beloved Fuehrer is dead. I now know that there never was an Alpine bastion. The German dream is over.

Today E—— gave us clothes and identity papers. Tomorrow we cross the border with other displaced persons. We are travelling in a convoy of trucks. Pray God it all goes well.

I am leaving this book and some private papers with E——. Perhaps one day the letters of commendation I have written for both of them will be of some use.

I wish to return here and it is not only to retrieve what has been buried. I wish to buy some land here and look upon this lake without fear. In peace time it will be beautiful and here perhaps, one day, I will find salvation.

* * *

I put down the notebook. Niefeld had escaped and he had returned to Bodenroche. He had retrieved the cargo from the bottom of the lake and bought the land from which he could look down upon the lake. The front of the notebook was a jumble of figures. There were weights and values of gold bars, of silver, even diamonds. There were listings of shares, Daimler Benz, Interhandel, Krupp, but these were in the minority. The larger investments were in companies that operated in Swiss and Allied territory. In the middle of the list of shareholdings that had been buried were shares against which no value had been placed. These were 1,000 shares in Odessa Anstalt.

It was at this point that I called Elmer. It was eight o'clock in the morning and he was already at the office, sounding bright and fresh.

"I can tell you something about Odessa Anstalt, right now, sir," he said.

I reached for a pad and paper. "Go ahead."

"First, the share capital is 1,000,000 Swiss francs divided into 1,000 shares of 1,000 francs each. The company has issued its shares in full and I have reason to believe that they are bearer shares. Second, directors—"

I got down their names, addresses and occupations.

Dr. Karl Peters Ziesel, lawyer, Vaduz.
Heinz Spuhling, lawyer, Vaduz.
Dr. Theodor Legermann, banker, Legermann & Cie, Zürich.
Erich Stommeler, civil servant, Bodenroche.

I waited. There was no sign of anyone called Helmut Beck. "Is that all?" I asked.

"Those are all the directors, sir. Yes." Elmer cleared his throat and there was a pause while he drank something. "I admit it is unusual, sir, to have a company with bearer shares and an even number of directors. Usually, in these circumstances, the owners wish to avoid deadlock."

"Thanks, Elmer," I said. "Thank you very much."

"Is that all you want to know, sir?"

In fact it wasn't. I was wondering how of all the thousands of companies registered in Switzerland and Liechtenstein Elmer happened to have at his fingertips all the facts on the one company that I was interested in.

"There is a meeting of the company to be held in five days time," Elmer went on. "It is a rather unusual meeting from a legal point of view. It is proposed at this meeting to appoint the Bank of Legermann & Cie as Receivers to the company."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know, sir. It could be that the company owes the bank money. It could be that the directors believe the shareholders are no longer alive and wish to be relieved of their responsibilities."

"What would be the effect of such an appointment being made?"

"Legermann & Cie would effectively control the company."

"And how would you advise a shareholder who was alive and had, say, 666 shares in the company, Elmer?"

"I would advise them to attend the meeting, sir. I would advise them most strongly to attend."

* * *

I ordered breakfast and tried to think. One thing was clear. I couldn't go back to England without the £2,000 I'd spent on the stamps. That money represented not only my savings but all I had to live on for the next few months. Without it, I would have to start taking money out of the shop, which would upset Keith because he would have to buy much less stock. That in turn would make the shop lose money and before long, I'd be forced to sign up with some two Dakota outfit like Air Chartel, or worse, rejoin Carruthers.

There had to be some other way. I dunked my croissants in the coffee and thought. The alternatives were all equally dismal. I could play at being the Marquesa's bodyguard and risk getting my throat cut. I could rob a bank with Ashraf and Dael and risk getting ten years in a Swiss jail. I could dive into a wintry Bodensee for the remnants of Niefeld's fortune and either freeze or drown.

Of all the alternatives only the first looked like producing any money. The Marquesa had probably taken whatever Niefeld had

left at Legermann's and I doubted very much whether Niefeld had left anything under the Bodensee.

It was at that moment that Dael phoned. "Nicholas! Did you sleep well?"

I grunted. "Tell me about the bank," she said.

"That will cost you money," I said, then remembering how much I needed, went on: "I've found out quite a lot more."

"Oh, Nicholas! You're wonderful!"

"You can't pay bills with compliments."

"Can you come out here?" she asked. "No, I'll come to your hotel."

"I'll need money," I said.

"How much?"

"Five thousand, sterling."

She went silent. After a while she said: "We haven't got that much, Nicholas. Couldn't we pay you afterwards?"

"No," I said. "There might not be any afterwards."

"You will get the plane," she said. "You will be with us."

"No," I said, "you won't need a plane. This is a once and only thing."

"I think I'd better come and see you," she said. "But where can I get £5,000?"

"I'll take less," I said.

"It will have to be a lot less, Nicholas. Please."

I could see the chances of my getting the £2,000 together slipping away. A few minutes later we settled at precisely that figure. She promised to bring the money.

* * *

She came about an hour later, brushing snow from her grubby white sheepskin. Her face was ruddy with cold and her hair sparkled in the light.

"Did you bring the money?" I asked.

She laid a wad of notes on the writing table, dropped her coat over a chair and leaned against the desk. One hand rested on the money.

She looked so young and innocent that I felt a twinge of guilt for what I was about to do. But I steeled myself to it. I didn't think I was being over-dramatic, but I felt very strongly that my life was at stake.

"The bank," I said, "is Legermann & Cie. Here you can read the account number on the bottom of the cheque."

She scribbled it down.

"There is no money there," I said. "So don't try to break into that bank."

I rang down for more coffee, and we sat round the trolley table. I told her what the Marquesa had told me about her meeting with the bank.

"I think," I said, "Niefeld kept his money in a company called Odessa Anstalt. The company issued bearer shares. Niefeld buried these shares in Austria, in a lake called the Bodensee."

She was beginning to look doubtful.

"Can you dive?" I asked.

"Ashraf has been trained," she replied.

I showed her the notebook. Her German was very poor and I filled in the places for her. I left out the paragraph at the end, the one about Niefeld returning to Bodenroche. Stylistically, it was much better that way.

"Can I keep the notebook?" she asked.

I shook my head. "You forget I am in the antique business."

"I thought you dealt in stamps."

"That too," I said.

We looked uncertainly at each other. I tilted the coffee jug. There was no more coffee.

"Will you go diving in the Bodensee?" I asked.

"I will have to speak to Ashraf. He went out this morning early, to meet with some people."

"Yes," I said. "The more one knows the better it is."

"Why are you not diving?" she asked. "Why are you giving so much away?"

"Because I am a nice guy," I said. "Besides I have an aversion to lakes ever since I fell in one."

She leaned across the table and kissed me quickly. Her lips were light and dry.

"I hope you really are a good man," she said. "And that you will understand."

"Understand what?"

She kissed me again. Her lips were softer this time. I went round the table.

Her body was soft and light in my arms, her lips were soft and pliable against mine. It was over four weeks since Arabella had

left me and the Adam in me began to stir violently. I tried to manoeuvre her towards the bed.

"No, Nicholas," she said, her eyes still closed.

My hand fumbled over the top of her sweater. She eased it away gently.

"I have a boyfriend," she said. "He is in the army."

Wherever he was I hoped the Arabs were giving him hell.

I leaned into the kiss with a lot of twisting of the head. "Won't your boyfriend mind this?"

I was feeling slightly cheated. It was she, after all, who had started it.

"He is a soldier. He will understand. In the army we kiss people who we like."

Like a bunch of bloody footballers, I thought. I got my tongue against hers.

"Like this?" I asked.

She didn't answer.

A long while later or what seemed like a long while later she moved away. She was breathing rapidly, her face was flushed. She looked down at the table. "Not quite like that," she said in a small voice.

There was a sharp rapping on the door and a voice outside said, "Mr. Maasten."

I thought it was a room waiter come to clear the breakfast things. "Wait," I said sharply. But the mood had been broken.

Dael was getting her coat. The wad of hundred franc notes lay rich and heavy on the table behind her. "I must go," she said. "We might have to start diving."

She reversed out of the room smiling. She opened the door and stood there a moment, lips pursed, fingers outstretched in a flying kiss. The man in the doorway stepped aside to let her pass and she didn't see him.

I did.

It was Helmut Beck.

21

While Beck moved weightily into the room, I covered the desk with my body and slipped the wad of money into the drawer. Dael's gun was in the pocket of my overcoat hanging in the wardrobe and there was no hope of my getting that.

Beck stood in the middle of the room and smiled his fat frog smile. His suit hung without any awkward bulges. Perhaps, I thought with relief, there would be no unpleasantness.

"Forgive me for intruding, Mr. Maasten," he said. He looked over his shoulder at the closed door. "Quite a delightful girl. Let me congratulate you on your taste."

"That isn't what you came to talk about," I said.

He nodded and took out a little plastic case. "Would you like a peppermint?" he asked.

I shook my head.

Beck sighed and squeezed a small circular pill of peppermint into his mouth. "I love peppermint," he said and looked keenly at me. The humour drained from his eyes.

"You are a friend," he paused and revolved the mint in his mouth, "an acquaintance of the Marquesa de Maerez?"

"Yes," I said.

"Might I ask how much she is paying you to look after her interests?"

"What makes you think she is paying me anything at all?"

His teeth crunched down on the peppermint with an ugly, grating sound. I wondered how many fillings he got through that way.

He said, "Here, in Switzerland, Mr. Maasten, it is not always possible to keep secrets. Information is a commodity, and like any other commodity can be bought and sold." He brought out

his plastic peppermint case. "I know something about your association with Air Chartel," he said, "and something of your—shall we say—war record?"

"If you are trying to blackmail me, forget it. I have done nothing illegal in Switzerland."

His eyebrows curled into commas of amazement. "Blackmail, Mr. Maasten, oh no! I wouldn't do anything as complicated as that. You are a mercenary, Mr. Maasten, nothing more or less than that. How much would it be worth to you to leave Switzerland today?"

He was so sure that I would accept that he was pulling out a fat leather wallet. "One thousand francs, two thousand?"

"I don't know if I could accept your offer."

"You would be wise to, Mr. Maasten. Very wise." He was counting out the notes. "You need a holiday," he said. "Away from all the unpredictabilities of Europe."

"I think you are telling me what to do," I said. "I don't like that."

"Telling you, Mr. Maasten, oh no! I am only helping you to do what you want to do." He stepped closer and lowered his voice. The sharp tang of mint washed over me. "What would you say to five thousand francs and a nice little holiday?"

"I think I would say no, Mr. Beck. I really think I would say no."

His face went hard and ugly underneath the fat. The little eyes stared angrily at me from between pouches of flesh. "You are very foolish, Mr. Maasten," he snapped. "Very foolish indeed."

He put the money away and walked massively to the door. I waited till he had turned the door knob before I said, "Leave the money, just in case I change my mind."

* * *

I took the money and counted it and laid it on the desk. This was getting to be like Premium Bond night. Taking into account the thousand dollars I had had from the Marquesa I was already showing a thirty per cent gross profit. Not bad, I thought, for doing little more than sitting around. Pity it couldn't last.

I opened the drawer and took out the money Dael had given me and began to count that. Altogether there were thirty-one hundred franc notes, fifteen at the top of the wad and fifteen at

the bottom, about £300 worth of Swiss currency. The rest of the wad consisted of sheets of blue paper, the same size as the Swiss hundred franc note. Each paper had a note of thanks written across it in Hebrew and English, and was signed by the committee of the kibbutz at Sidi El Kerim.

It was the kind of document that was often sold to tourists in Israel, and has the twin advantages of obtaining foreign currency and at the same time leaving the tourist with a feeling of having spent his money constructively. The tourist donates the cost of a tree, and feels he has helped to make the desert bloom.

I was not feeling constructive even though it looked as if somehow I had contributed enough to re-plant half the Sinai. All those bits of paper were receipts for one hundred and fifty trees planted on some barren hillside, which four years ago had been Jordanian.

* * *

Elmer hunched over the bicycling machine, his face contorted into a roseate, wrinkled orange. Sweat spattered off his frantically moving body, the legs flashing round, stringy muscles stretching and contracting like insane rubber snakes. On the balcony above us, someone dropped a set of weights with a ringing clatter.

I had phoned Elmer soon after Beck left. The only free time he had, had been while he did his exercises.

The speedometer on the static machine showed thirty k.p.h. Elmer rose in his seat in a final sprint, mouth sagging open, eyes fast shut focussed on some imaginary winning line. He pedalled faster and faster. The machine rocked and I thought the little bugger would pedal off it and smash against the wooden racks on the far wall.

With a sudden gasp he stopped and sank down on the seat, shoulders slumping, legs drooping on either side of the saddle. The tripmeter read 5.2 kilometres. There was no sound except for his tortured panting and the irregular puffing from the solitary weight lifter on the balcony above us.

"You should do some of this, sir," he said when he had recovered sufficient breath. "It will keep you trim."

Apart from a lute-like curve in the area of his stomach, Elmer was very trim. His body was compact and firm, his chest surprisingly deep. Mind you, he never would be very strong but

what he had Elmer groomed and developed and intended preserving.

He stepped into the dressing-gown I held out for him and walked across the empty wooden floor. Earlier I had trotted thirty circuits of the gym floor and told Elmer about the Marquesa, my trip to Bodenroche and what I had found in the safe.

"So you want me to legally represent the Marquesa?" Elmer asked.

"Yes. The meeting is in four days time and she will need legal advice."

"The meeting is in Vaduz?"

"I don't know," I said. "Shouldn't it be held at the bank?"

"No, sir. That would not be proper. Odessa is a Liechtenstein corporation, so the meeting should be held in Liechtenstein. I would imagine the meeting will take place at the offices of one of the directors resident in Liechtenstein." Elmer smiled at me. "All Liechtenstein corporations must have one director resident there."

"Thank you," I said, "I suppose you will be telling me where Liechtenstein is next."

"Don't you know, sir? It's that tiny little country between Switzerland and Austria. It's so small you could drive across it in twenty minutes. It has a customs treaty with Switzerland and its capital is Vaduz. It is a monarchy and has a population—"

"Save it," I snapped, "for the Marquesa."

"The meeting will be in Vaduz," Elmer said firmly, "at Dr. Spuhling's. I presume the Marquesa will require my presence there."

"She'll want your help before that. There must be documents to study and tactics to discuss." I paused. "She might even want a bodyguard."

Elmer looked up at me. His blue eyes were very clear and the tiny creases on his forehead eased. "I understand, sir," he said and walked across to the wall rack.

"There's a lot of money involved," I said. "Your fee should be considerable."

"Thank you, sir," Elmer said and lay down in front of the wall rack. He rolled his towel into a pillow and placed it underneath his head. Then he hooked his feet under the second rung of the rack. "I will call the Marquesa as soon as I get back to the office."

He began to do sit-ups. I squatted down. Elmer's body jackknifed past me. "Elmer," I said.

"What?" Body flying backwards.

"You won't forget." His head flashed up to tautened knees. He grunted. It was like watching a table tennis match from the net post.

"What, sir?" He was lying back again.

"The usual," I said. He was coming up.

Three movements later, on the down swing, he asked: "The usual what, sir?"

"My cut back on your fees."

Elmer was gone again. There was a pain in the fold of my knees as if a tight rubber ball was being pressed into them. I began to sway.

"That is unethical, sir."

Two more quick movements.

"But you'll do it?"

Elmer stopped moving and lay stretched out on the wooden floor. His eyes were closed and he was panting softly. Sweat stood out in huge drops on his face, turning his pale brown crew cut almost black. "Yes," he said. "Of course." His eyes fluttered open, the expression in them was pained.

"I will be off then," I said. "See you around."

Elmer got to his feet and looked round the gym. "There is something very interesting about Odessa Anstalt," he said and began to climb up the rack. He reached the top and turned round sitting on the uppermost rung. I went up after him.

"I was reading the company's charter," Elmer said as coolly as if he had been sitting in his office. "It appears that no substantial change can be made in the affairs of the company unless the holder of the *zessionserklärung* consents. On the other hand the holder of the *zessionserklärung* cannot institute any changes unless the majority of shareholders agree."

He gave me a smile before he dropped off the bar and hung by his hands. "It is what they call a deadlock," Elmer said from two feet below me.

"So the Marquesa cannot get hold of the assets of the company?"

"The only way she can do that is by liquidating the company. And she cannot liquidate the company unless she holds the *zessionserklärung* as well."

He swung his legs vertical to his body. "She can retain the dividends," he said. "She can oppose the appointment of a

receiver. She cannot, however, change the directors or the bank."

Talking like this was difficult. I swung down beside Elmer, hands stretched overhead like a prisoner suspended from a dungeon wall.

"Who has the *zessionserklärung*?" I asked.

"No-one," Elmer said. "Yet." He had his legs stretched out straight in front of him and was revolving them in wide circles. "I think the *zessionserklärung* and the remaining shares in Odessa are under the Bodensee," he said.

I nearly dropped off the rack. I realised exactly how Iscariot must have felt at getting only thirty pieces of silver. For three hundred pounds and a gift of one hundred and fifty trees to a barren kibbutz I had given away most of my chances of getting five million pounds. All right. Five million pounds give or take a few hundred thousand.

My arms ached with the unnatural stretching. I climbed off the rack very slowly.

"What makes you think they are still under the Bodensee?" I asked.

"In the past two years three divers have been drowned there. And last winter a man was found dead on the mountain opposite the village. He had been shot. He had no clothes on and he was never identified."

I wondered how far from the ski hut the man had been found.

Elmer dropped to the floor. "I wouldn't go to Bodenroche," he said firmly. "Like most of the Austrian lakes the bottom is treacherous, and covered with wrecks. In any case it would take too long. If you want to do anything constructive you must have the certificates before the meeting. If you go diving it will have to be illegal. You need a salvage permit and you have no chance of getting that in less than a month." He shook his head. "Bodenroche is a waste of time."

"What will you do about the Marquesa?"

"I will negotiate," Elmer said. "Negotiate with the Directors, negotiate with the others."

"Others?"

Elmer looked trustingly at me. "I have a theory, sir," he said. "I believe that Niefeld deliberately left the *zessionserklärung* underneath the Bodensee. The shares he held gave him day to day control and that was enough. Now, from what you have told me, we both know that Niefeld was not overfond of Legermann

& Cie. We also know that at any time he could have recovered the *zessionserklärung*, combined it with his 666 shares and changed the bankers. He never did that."

I stared at Elmer in puzzlement.

"I think, sir," Elmer went on, "it is because there was someone else. Someone else who held the balance shares and was strong enough to influence Niefeld. With the public advertisement of the meeting, I think we have a better chance of finding that someone else."

Elmer began to jog up and down. "Are you going back to London?" he asked.

"Eventually," I said. "Just now I am going to Bodenroche."

"Too bad," Elmer replied. "It is such a waste of time."

I agreed with him. But someone had to warn those two innocents, especially if they were going to get their hands on £10,000,000.

22

BODENROCHE WAS A narrow road rising sheer up the mountainside. At the marketplatz there was a fountain of scarred and weather beaten stone, ringed with icicles. It stood in the middle of the street where the road thickened out like the base of a bottle. All along the street were dark timbered shops, huddling as if hiding from a common enemy.

Below Bodenroche was the lake, a gleaming silvery toadstool into which the dark shadow of the wharf protruded like a long finger. Above the village was the chairlift creaking painfully up the slope of the overhanging mountain.

I reached Bodenroche in time for dinner. The Porsche was parked between the Gasthof Bodenroche and the Hollywood Bar. It was not difficult to guess where Ashraf and Dael were.

Dael's face clouded as I entered the dining room of the Gasthof Bodenroche.

"You have come for the rest of the money?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. A waiter hovered by my shoulder. "You can start by buying me dinner."

"We will buy you dinner with pleasure," Ashraf said. "But we haven't got the money. You will have to wait until afterwards."

"There is something else," I said. I took the Mauser from my pocket and slipped it under the tablecloth. "You are going to need this."

"We have guns," Ashraf said.

Dael said, "Keep the gun as security for the rest of your money."

I didn't argue. The waiter was coming back with my veal salad and you couldn't go placing guns on dining tables in

Austria, even if they were covered by the tablecloth. I put the gun back in my pocket.

"There have been some deaths in the Bodensee," I said, beginning to eat. "Strange deaths in still water."

"The bottom is false," Ashraf said.

"Last winter a man was found dead in the hills on the other side of the lake. No-one could identify him."

It was Dael who spoke, "What are you trying to do, Nicholas. Frighten us?"

"No," I said. "I am trying to warn you."

Ashraf glared at his coffee. "We are staying," he said. "We are staying until we have searched the lake."

"You need a salvage permit for that," I said. "Besides you do not have the time." I told him about the Odessa meeting.

"I have already heard about that," Ashraf said. "Tomorrow we start diving at dawn."

"For God's sake, man! Be sensible! You could get killed!"

"So?"

I looked at them angrily. "Who let you children into this?" I demanded. "Who is responsible for you?"

"There is no-one in charge of us," Ashraf said and laughed. "The person to whom we were directly responsible is Jacob. And you know what happened to him."

I looked at Dael. "There was someone else," I said, "you told me about Colonel Raab."

Ashraf shook his head. "Raab is nothing to do with us now. We were seconded to Horowitz and as far as Raab is concerned, we are Horowitz's property."

"There must be someone here," I protested.

"*Shlemiels!*" Dael interjected. "Nogoodniks who let their bottoms get fat doing research."

"Active espionage is forbidden in Switzerland," Ashraf said. "Switzerland is a neutral country."

"And Israel has good relations with Switzerland," Dael continued. "Our people wish to maintain those relations."

"Quite right," I said, "very sensible. You must on no account upset friendly relations between countries."

"We won't," Ashraf said.

"You will cease diving?"

"No."

I frowned. "But—"

"We're private individuals," Dael said. "No-one has responsibility for us." She laughed. "A boy and a girl on holiday."

"You're being ridiculous!" I cried.

"All we're doing," Ashraf said, "is making reparation to Jacob."

"You're fools!" I said sharply. "You could get killed. I am sure Jacob wouldn't want that."

"He wouldn't," Dael's hand closed over Ashraf's. It was a gesture of consolation rather than affection. "But we do what we have to do," she said softly.

* * *

Ashraf went to bed soon afterwards. Diving, especially in near Arctic temperatures saps the body. All you wish to do afterwards is to eat largely and sleep. I know.

"Isn't there anyone else," I asked Dael, "to help?"

She laughed. "You," she said and then became serious. "As I told you. We are an embarrassment to our friends here. They are under strict orders to do nothing that would infringe Swiss neutrality. So they disown us and do research."

"And they can't stop you either?"

"No," she said. "We belong to a different section. No-one knows what to do with us."

"And you will continue diving?"

"Yes," she said. "Of course."

After I had eaten we walked down to the lake. Their diving equipment was stored in a hut at the side of the lake opposite to the wharf. I was surprised at the range and modernity of the equipment.

They had everything. Max Vue face masks, Hydromatic fins, double edged Grisbi's with six and a half inch blades. There were a row of Mistral Slim Twin oxygen cylinders and insulated rubber diving suits. I noticed that there were three suits, only two of which had been used. But what attracted me most of all was the Underwater Propulsion Unit.

It looked like a round-nosed torpedo, except at the rear where you would expect to find a fin, there was a circular propeller guard, two hand grips and the driving controls. A small screen was angled along the top of the unit and by this you could see the tops of the batteries that powered the entire device. The UPU, as it was called in the trade, was capable of up to about six knots

and it had a battery of underwater lamps slung across its front. It weighed about one hundred pounds and I would have thought that using it, Ashraf could have swept the floor of the lake in about a week.

The only trouble was he did not have a week.

"The equipment is terrific," I said. "Where did you get it? Was it your friends?"

"When all you do is research, you learn how to get things fast."

"It could take a week," I said. "The search."

"Three days. If it doesn't snow or rain."

"Do you dive too?"

"Not very much. Ashraf doesn't let me."

I looked round the hut. "I meant what I said about divers meeting with strange deaths here. You should be armed, at least."

Dael walked to a corner of the hut and began to move some of the oxygen cylinders. "We have the Winchester in the car," she said, "and when we go diving, I take this."

This was a Schmeisser machine pistol. It was outrageously balanced, a nasty vicious looking piece of artillery, with a skeleton wooden butt and a barrel that was pinpointed with rust. If anyone fired that pistol, I would prefer to have been standing well behind it.

"No-one will get us," Dael said, waving the gun at me.

"At least you can crawl into it and hide," I said glumly.

She locked the hut with two massive Yales and we wandered back up to the hotel. Halfway up the path I stopped and kissed her. Overhead the stars were sharp and hard.

After a while, she pulled back and said, "Nicholas, I must go." Her lips touched my cheek in the darkness. "I must go," she repeated. "We will be diving as soon as it is dawn."

I kept my arm round her waist and we walked up the path together, stones rolling loosely from under our feet. "You can dive," she said. "I could tell by the way you looked at the equipment." Her face looked up at me, eyes glinting brightly out of the night. "Stay and help us? Please!"

I turned away and looked up at the lights of the town stretching thick yellow fingers down to us. "I have given an undertaking not to break Swiss neutrality," I said. "I am leaving for England tomorrow. I only came here to warn you."

Her grip on my arm tightened. "Did you really, Nicholas? Really?"

I didn't say anything. We walked on in silence.

As we neared the hotel she said, "You're a good man, Nicholas. I am sorry I called you a *momzer*."

Dael went to bed as soon as we reached the hotel. I sat in the bar and nursed a brandy, trying to think of nothing. I hadn't succeeded when Elmer walked in, muffled in suede and sheepskin, wearing a leather deerstalker cap. He blinked round the room through misted up glasses.

"Ah, there you are, sir," he said.

I asked the barman for a large dry Martini with two cherries in it.

* * *

"I am so glad I've found you, sir," Elmer said, unbuttoning his sheepskin and sitting down next to me. He placed his hands between his knees and rubbed them.

I moved the Martini in front of him. "If you get to Bodenroche in time for dinner," I said, "you stay."

Elmer said: "Cheers," and drank his Martini. When he put the glass down he looked nervous, as if there had been something wrong with the drink and he was finding the courage to complain.

He said: "I think, sir, I've found the other shareholder in Odessa."

I shook out a cigarette and lit it. Obviously Elmer hadn't driven over snowbound roads for nearly four hours only to tell me that. There had to be more to it. Something illegally and dangerously more, and whatever it was I felt I was about to be asked to do it.

"I'm going back to England tomorrow," I said firmly. "I have a business to look after."

"What you have to do is quite simple, sir. Quite simple and quite safe."

"You do it," I said.

"I cannot, sir," Elmer said, "the Marquesa insists upon you."

"The Marquesa?"

"The very same sir." He sipped his drink and said: "She thinks you have an honest face."

"What do you think you are doing, Elmer?" I asked. "You are supposed to be a lawyer. Not a pimp."

"She said honest," Elmer replied, "not beautiful. Besides, sir, you told me I might have to find her a bodyguard."

"I didn't mean me, you idiot."

Elmer grinned into his Martini. "She did."

I glowered at him. He sipped his Martini and said: "This man, this third man, Heller, lives in Berlin. It is essential that the Marquesa sees him before the Odessa meeting. It is essential that they meet away from Zürich."

Elmer fished the cherry out of his Martini and held it in front of him like a lollipop. "The Marquesa is being very tiresome, sir, extremely tiresome." Elmer popped the cherry into his mouth. He chewed as he spoke. "She refuses to go to Berlin without you."

"There's no accounting for taste," I said.

Elmer sipped his Martini. "I think she is being very foolish, sir. There is nothing to fear from this man Beck." He shook his head in dismissal.

"I've met Beck," I said. "The Marquesa is right to worry about him."

"If that is the case, sir," Elmer said gravely, "both of you would be much safer in Berlin."

"I'd rather be in England."

"The Marquesa has authorised me to offer you £1,000 for the three days that you will spend in Berlin."

£1,000 was just what I needed to break even on the whole episode. Elmer's little pay off when it came would be sheer profit. I thought about Berlin and about the £1,000. If Beck didn't know the Marquesa was in Berlin, he couldn't do anything to her, could he?

"Are you coming to Berlin too?" I asked.

Elmer shook his head. "I am not needed. The Marquesa has been briefed on what she should say to Heller and how much she should give away in order to secure his support. My presence would only add too great a formality to their meeting."

"I see," I said, even though I didn't.

"£1,000 for three days," I said, "I accept."

With the knowledge I had then it seemed foolish to do anything else. At the time, I thought the only problem would be Beck.

Part Five

23

WE CAME INTO Berlin late the next afternoon, the plane flying very low, its spread out wing tips almost touching the characterless brown stone buildings that surrounded the football field that was Tempelhof.

It was the worst time of the year to visit Berlin. The temperature was three degrees below zero, the snow was piled two feet high on the slippery pavements. A biting wind whistled down the Budapester Strasse.

Despite the weather the hotels were full. There was an American movie company at the Hilton filming a sex movie in studios near Spandau and a convention of Japanese opticians. We were given rooms on the sixth floor. The only problem was that they were at opposite ends of the corridor.

I left the bellboy checking the Marquesa's towels and went on along the corridor. The distance between our rooms raised problems of security and communication. Not that I expected much trouble in the way of security. I was mainly anxious that the Marquesa didn't meet Heller without me.

The maid had left my door on the latch, so I thrust the room key with its heavy plastic pillar into my pocket and went in. Congealed wintry light eked through the huge plate glass window in the far wall. It was enough for me to see that there was someone stretched comfortably across my bed.

The Mauser was in my suitcase. I pulled out the key with its heavy plastic pillar.

"*Begorrah!*" said Patrick Lelup. "Welcome to Berlin."

* * *

He was fully and fashionably dressed in a yellow crew-neck sweater and flared red trousers. His feet were clad in boots the colour of claret with large gold buckles on the side of the foot. His leather jacket was draped neatly over a chair and there was a half-empty bottle of Scotch on the table by the bed.

I put my case on the rack and walked over to the window. There was an uneasy tremulousness about my knees. I had a horrible sensation that something had gone terribly wrong.

I stared at the electric blue Mercedes star hovering above the Europa Centre.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked.

Patrick sat up and splashed whisky into two glasses.

"Waiting for you, squire. Waiting for you." He held out a glass, "Ice, soda, water?"

I took the whisky neat. I felt it was going to be necessary.

"How's the little lady?" Patrick asked. "She come with you?"

I nodded.

"That's good," Patrick said, "very good." He shifted the glass from one hand to the other. "Carruthers sent me. He wants to see this man, Heller."

"He's probably in the phone book," I said, "why don't you call him?" Then I wondered how Carruthers or Patrick or anyone could have known about Heller or that I was coming to Berlin. "Who was it?" I asked, "Robey?"

Patrick nodded and the professional in me felt disappointed. He should have been more careful than that. "The Department has had a file on Heller for some time," Patrick said.

"What about you?" I asked. "What sin have you committed that makes you work for Carruthers?"

Patrick gave me a sheepish smile. "You know what it's like," he said and went silent. Then he said: "The money's good."

"It usually is," I replied dryly.

Patrick went across to the window and drew the curtain. Then he turned on the lights. The room was small, with a sofa under the window, a desk and chair and a bed. There was a modern print on the wall that looked like a traffic accident.

"We can't phone Heller," Patrick said. "It's very difficult to phone East Berlin."

"You can go and see him," I said, "Checkpoint Charlie is always open."

"Carruthers had a better idea," Patrick said. "He thought it

would be much better if you brought Heller back to the West."

I felt my mouth go dry and that same tremulousness in my knees. Indeed something had gone very wrong. I went over to the sofa and sat down. Twice, when I had neeb working for Carruthers, I had brought people across the Wall. They had both been amongst my most unpleasant experiences.

"There are people who make a living smuggling refugees across the Wall."

"We can't trust outsiders with Heller," Patrick replied. "He's too valuable."

"Then use someone from the Department. Carruthers must have dozens of willing young men."

"True," Patrick agreed. "But we can't have the Department involved. It would make it too official. The money would have to be accounted for, paid over to Allied Commissions, reparation committees. Carruthers wants the money for the Department. Private like."

Right, I thought, one couldn't have a Department of Her Majesty's Government hanging on to money that had been expropriated from German Jews. Not officially anyway.

"Carruthers would like you to organise Heller's crossing. I have seen Heller. He will be ready tomorrow night."

"I couldn't do it," I said. "I haven't done anything like this in years. In any case there isn't time."

"You only need a car," Patrick said, "we can put it back twenty-four hours if it suits you."

"That," I said, "is jolly decent."

I poured some more whisky into the glass and began to walk about the room. I felt trapped. The regular pacing between the door and the window only emphasised it.

"I won't do it," I said.

"There is a £5,000 fee and you can spend what you like. Carruthers said you'd like that."

"There's also a bullet with my name on it and a ten year jail stretch."

Patrick laughed encouragingly. "You won't get caught, Nicholas. You're too damned good."

I said, "I'm not doing it," and stopped in the centre of the room.

Patrick got up from the bed and poured out more whisky into

his glass. He didn't look at me when he spoke. "Things might get difficult," he said, "if you return to England. You have so many dubious occupations."

It was interesting that he should have used the same terminology as Garcia. The disadvantage of being in a dubious occupation was that it was so easy to be framed. A couple of stolen vehicles through the car sales room, a stripper swearing that she was on the game, even poor Keith accused of soliciting in a public lavatory. It was all so bloody easy, especially if you were Carruthers.

"I haven't any contacts now," I said, "it was all so long ago."

"Try," Patrick said. "Ask around." He finished his drink. "I'll be at the Ambassador if you want me." He slipped into his jacket. It was well finished leather and fitted him closely. "By the way," he asked, "what happened to the stamps?"

"Someone shot them."

"Shot them?"

"With a Winchester rifle."

He dropped an envelope on the table and said: "Shit! The stamps belonged to the British Museum."

"Charge it to expenses," I said and picked up the envelope. Inside was a draft for £5,000. The bastards even knew the name of my bankers in Zürich.

24

I SPENT THE rest of the evening asking around. Few people were interested. There was a thaw in East-West relations and running refugees across the Wall was unfashionable and unprofitable. Besides, as they took great pains to tell me, the East German Vopos had learned through experience. Their inspections of vehicles crossing the Border were now a whole lot more thorough.

"That isn't a problem," Johnny Bauman said. "Not really a problem. Not if you have the right kind of auto." Bauman had once worked for the C.I.A. from whom he'd acquired a taste for Saks style grey tweed and Bourbon mixed with Canada Dry. He had the tanned skin and clear blue eyes of a successful bond salesman or someone who had just returned from a skiing holiday. He was in his early forties, good looking with a manner that inspired instant trust or distrust, depending upon the kind of experience you had had.

"I have just the thing for you, Nicholas," he said. "A virgin." He pursed his lips and pressed the tips of his fingers to them. "She's really kind of perfect."

The price was perfect too. $5,000. If Avis rented their cars on the same basis, I thought, they wouldn't have to try harder.

The car was stored in a lock up garage near Wedding. It was a fiesta yellow Oldsmobile Toronado, an ugly aggressive-looking car, long and low and wide, with a huge predatory fluted bonnet like the sculpted front of a jeep. The huge seven and a half litre engine seemed to hang below the body line, protected by a curved shield and bumpers like guard rails on a freeway. Only the roll bar was non standard. That and the hole between the tail lamp cluster that looked as if it had been made by a high velocity bullet.

"She's a dreamboat," Bauman breathed, "a real dreamboat."

"So's a Volkswagen if you've got the right company."

I walked slowly around the car. My footsteps made a hollow ringing sound that reminded me uncomfortably of a cell block. The car was fast. There was little doubt about that. 0 to 60 in under 7 seconds and probably 110 in D.1. But it wasn't speed that concerned me. There is no car that can out accelerate a rifle bullet. I was concerned about the handling. I wondered how she would behave flung sideways round those concrete barriers.

"She's very special," Bauman said, "custom built." He showed me.

The car had specially reinforced wheel arches so that if it hit anything the wing would not collapse on the tyres. The outer headlamps swivelled and were of quartz halogen.

"You could blind the opposition," Bauman said.

The windshield was tinted and bullet resistant. The entire body had been seam welded and fitted with extra heavy duty suspension in case it had to bounce over pavements. The bottom gear was especially low and the tyres were self sealing.

Bauman led me to the rear of the car and opened the boot. "The dimensions," he said, "are standard." He leaned forward and pulled the carpet. "Note the velcroed edge," he said. "No fiddling about with studs in the dark. Just put it back and it sticks."

He demonstrated that and pulled the carpet back again revealing a steel grey floor panel. The floor panel was held in place by four Phillips screws. Bauman deftly unscrewed them. "We always use Phillips," he said. "Somehow they never seem to have the right screwdrivers."

Underneath the panel were twin petrol tanks painted a dull non reflective black. The top of one lifted out easily revealing a hollow cavity which led through the front of the boot into the body of the car. "One of the advantages of front wheel drive," Bauman said, "no transmission tunnel. Your customer lies down in here. His body goes where the transmission tunnel would be. His head is in the dummy tank. It leaves the car entirely standard. Only the floor is a little higher than normal. I don't think the Vopos will notice."

"You hope," I muttered.

"Air is force fed through the front of the boot. Try not to remain stationary for more than an hour."

"Why?"

"It gets sickening in there. Stale air, you know."

He gave me a plastic handled screwdriver. "You'd better learn to play with all those screws."

I practised for twenty minutes. At the end of that time I could get the screws out and back in under forty seconds. I practised with my eyes shut and wondered whether it would be like that in the dark. When I straightened up a twinge of pain in the small of my back made me flinch. It felt like a muscle being pulled and twisted.

"I suppose," Bauman said, "you're going yourself. I suppose it is someone special."

I stared at him. "Yes," I said.

His hand reached up for the light switch. I caught it and folded the wrist back, turning Bauman round so that I could look into that sun tanned face with its honest blue eyes and straight cut jaw of a regular guy.

"There's a bullet hole in the back of the car," I said.

Bauman grinned weakly. "I'll have it filled up for you, Nick."

"You said it was a virgin."

Bauman shrugged. "Well," he said, "almost."

"How many times has it been used before?"

"Once."

"And the bullet hole?"

"Not here in Berlin."

"Where?"

"The Hungarian border. It is not far from Munich."

I gave him a bitter grin. In the Department they called it optimum use of equipment. A specially built escape vehicle was worthless unless it was being fully utilised. It was just like an aeroplane—you lost money every minute they were on the ground.

"And Berlin?" I asked. "How many times?"

"Once."

"Safe?"

"As houses."

I unclamped my fingers stiffly. As the lights flickered out, I reflected that the trouble in this business was that you never knew when your friends were lying.

25

I LEFT THE Oldsmobile in the garage and went with Bauman to the Ambassador. Patrick argued about the price until I told him to either pay up or carry Heller across the wall on his shoulders. Then I went back to the garage and tried out the car. It was fast and solid as a tank. It also handled well. I began to feel a little better about the whole situation.

It was late when I got back to the Hilton. There was a thin ribbon of light from under the Marquesa's door. I remembered there was something else I needed to know.

She was awake, reading. Her hair hung loose about her shoulders and she was wearing a blue silk dressing-gown and nothing much else. She smelt of fresh lavender.

"Nicholas!" she said. "Where were you? I waited for you to have dinner!"

"I was busy," I said.

"I had to eat in my room, alone."

"Tough," I said. "Tell me about Heller."

She gave me a puzzled glance. "Heller is the third shareholder in Odessa. I want him to support me in proposing the liquidation of the company and the distribution of its assets. Mr. Robey felt that if all the shareholders agreed then we would be able to dispense with this nonsense about founders certificates."

"He's a very clever man," I said. "Elmer Robey."

"Yes," she said.

"Did you know Heller lives in East Berlin?"

"Didn't you?" she asked.

"No," I answered. "I'm always the last to know."

She came across the room carrying a glass of brandy. "I thought Robey had explained it all to you," she said.

"Someone else did. I am supposed to get Heller out of East Berlin."

She lit a thoughtful cigarette. "You will?"

"Yes," I said. "I will. I'll bring him out tomorrow."

"Wrong, Nicholas," she said. "We bring him out tomorrow."

"Don't be ridiculous." She came and stood right up close to me. I tried not to think of her breasts curving freely under the soft blue silk. I tried not to think that there was only the soft blue silk between us.

"Do you know someone called Carruthers?" I asked. "Or Lelup?"

"No." She smiled. "I know someone called Maasten, and I like him." She reached upwards and kissed me full on the mouth. The cigarette rolled from her hand and fell smouldering on the carpet.

"Nicholas," she breathed softly, "we're going to bring Heller out of East Berlin. You and me."

I decided to leave the question of who went to East Berlin open. I was beginning to realise very vividly that it was well over four weeks since Arabella had left me and that if I stayed, there wouldn't be any problems of security.

I pulled the Marquesa to me and kissed her fiercely on the mouth. Her body twisted against mine and I got one hand between the loose folds of her dressing-gown. Her breasts fitted perfectly into my cupped palm.

"Nicholas," she said. "Don't. Please don't."

I ran a teasing finger over the upraised nipple.

"Tomorrow we might be in separate jails," I said.

With a sharp jab of her elbow she broke free. Her face was flushed and her hair hung in a tousled stream. "No, Nicholas," she said, "it's the wrong time."

I moved after her. "It isn't," I said, "it's the best time. There's no time like the present."

The Marquesa stopped and stared at me in amazement. "Nicholas," she asked, "don't you know *anything* about women?"

26

EARLY THE NEXT morning I walked across to the Ambassador to see Patrick. The streets were bitterly cold and the wind cut through my clothes like a knife. The Mercedes star still glowed over the city. The cold was strangely antiseptic.

Over breakfast we ran through our schedule again. I would cross into East Berlin in the early afternoon and pick up Heller that evening past the Dorfstrasse intersection. Once I got back I would drive to the Strasse de 17 Juni where Patrick would be waiting. There would be no difficulty identifying him. He would be driving a British registered MGB. "There's one problem," I said, "the Marquesa wants to come with me."

"That's alright. She's supposed to go with you."

"I'd be better alone." It was always simpler if you only had to think of saving your own skin.

Patrick divided the remnants of the luke warm coffee between our cups. "It's like this," Patrick said, "Heller has been in East Berlin for years. For years he has been too frightened to risk making the crossing. He has been waiting for the day when the two Germanies are united, when he can come back to the West and claim his fortune. Heller's got to know that his time has run out." Patrick sipped the coffee, made a face, and put the cup down. "He's got to be convinced that Niefeld is dead. And as we can't show him the body, we show him Niefeld's widow."

"You think of everything, don't you?" I said. "Every single mean little thing. You bastards really know it all, don't you?"

Patrick smiled, looking down at the table.

"Carruthers does," he said softly.

* * *

The lobby of the Hilton was a swirling mass of people. The reception desk was crowded with people checking in and checking out. Pill box hatted bell boys tottered through the revolving doors carrying large suitcases and the commissionaire whistled up taxis like a referee at a Scottish football match.

I queued patiently for my room key and shouldered my way through the throng. One dimensional Muzak poured sweetly through the loudspeakers mounted high on the lobby pillars. I didn't see the man waiting for me by the lift door until it was too late to avoid him.

His stomach hung comfortably and his shoulders drooped like a collapsing tent. The smell of mint washed all over me. "Ah, Mr. Maasten, hope springs eternal in the human breast." His eyes went hard. "Wasn't £500 enough?" Helmut Beck demanded.

He began to walk me towards the bar. His clothes had the slightly crumpled look of someone who has travelled much and he had shaved patchily.

We went into the bar and Beck ordered drinks.

"£500 isn't enough," I said. "Not when you're chasing £5,000,000."

His eyes hung onto my face like limpets. He rapidly pressed a mint into his mouth and said: "So you know."

I nodded. Beck had ordered a large brandy for me. He, not surprisingly, was drinking crème de menthe.

"It may be better, Mr. Maasten," he sighed softly, "if you were to get onto the winning side."

"It's a thought," I said. "Tell me more."

Beck contemplated the row of bottles across the bar. The cleaners were still unstacking chairs and emptying ashtrays. The lobby outside was a ceaseless patter of feet.

"I know why you are in Berlin," Beck said. "You have spoken to too many people since you have been here in Berlin." He shifted uncomfortably on the stool and turned to look at me. "That was imprudent. Why don't you bring Heller to us?"

"I have friends," I said. "There are others to consider."

"I know," Beck said, "we can take care of them."

"I'd like to think it over," I said.

Beck gave me a thoughtful stare. "That is a very good idea. Shall we meet here tomorrow?"

I found it difficult not to breathe a sigh of relief. Whatever

Beck had learned, he obviously didn't know that we were bringing Heller out that evening.

"That'll be fine," I said and twisted my lips into a smile. "It will cost you a lot of money, though."

Beck clasped my shoulder with a hand like wet dough.

"Till tomorrow, my friend," he said and dropping clumsily off the stool walked quickly from the bar.

27

GETTING INTO EAST Berlin was the easiest part of it. You drove along the amputated stump of the Friedrichstrasse, past the Wall Museum with its huge photograph of a refugee, rigid in a frozen run, twisting under the impact of bullets. You went past the blue and white notices in English, German and Russian that were like motorway signs and said that you were leaving the American sector, and you showed your passport to the cheerful negro sergeant in the glass sided pillbox.

I tried not to think what it would be like getting out.

We drove gently away from the American sector, around the concrete blocks towards the battery of huts and watch towers and barbed wire beyond the upraised red striped barriers.

"I am sorry about last night," the Marquesa said.

I shrugged. "It wasn't your fault," I said, "blame it on the stars."

"I want us to be friends, Nicholas," she said. "Whatever happens."

"Sure," I said. I doubted very much whether I would get an opportunity to pursue this new relationship.

I parked the car outside the low roofed Kontrol hut and we clattered up the snow-covered wooden steps. We surrendered our passports and began to fill out our currency declarations. We sat on the hard socialist furniture under the flat soulless lighting and waited. On this side of the border everything took ten times as long.

I asked, "Why are you coming with me?"

The Marquesa said, "Because Heller made it a condition."

"Is that all?"

"I didn't want anyone to double-cross me," she said.

I swallowed.

"You must think me very suspicious," she said, "very mercenary. You must think that I am a very hard person." She gave me the Madonna smile. "I am not like that at all."

"No," I said. "You are not."

"I am doing all this for the de Maerez estate," she said. "It is the only way I know to save it. Did you know, Nicholas, that over three hundred persons depend for their living on the estate? If the estate ever turns into a beach resort, these people will have no work and nowhere to live. I can't let that happen."

"Sure," I said. It didn't make me feel any less frightened to know that there were three hundred Spanish peasants who could remember me in their prayers.

Half an hour later we were summoned to the passport counter, stared at and permitted to enter East Berlin.

* * *

We spent the afternoon like tourists. That was part of the plan. We visited the Pergamon Museum and climbed to the top of the Television Tower. We looked at the much rebuilt Staatsoper Opera House and watched the Russian soldiers clad in thick khaki serge, parade in front of the War Memorial in Treptow Park.

In the early evening we found a bar and spent what was left of our East German marks. It was a dark, gloomy place with the wine at six marks a bottle. The East Berliners drank coffee, and loud-speakers relayed a Liszt concerto. We amused ourselves spotting the tourists. It wasn't too difficult. All you had to do was look at the quality and the cut of their clothes.

It was dark when we left, the lights coming in over the wall, turning the sky a pale pink. There were more people on the pavements walking lumberingly with a spread, unhurried gait. Youths huddled in doorways, the silver aerials of their transistors protruding like spears, an occasional jazzy wail breaking the regular rumble of traffic and the steady shuffle of feet. High above the Wall news flashes bubbled along the side of the Axel Springer building.

I felt the tension rising, thickly.

I drove carefully round the centre, avoiding the leisurely traffic jams and then cut back to Alexanderplatz. From there I

moved outwards again towards Weissensee, passing closed U-Bahn stations and remembering the notations on the map '*Züge halten hier nicht*'. It reminded me of blisters on clotted arteries, the trains rumbling locked and barred under the city, under the Wall, glimpses as fleeting and as fragile as the light flashing along the platform.

We moved further away from the Wall. The houses became more squalid, the cars fewer. The flags drooped more despondently, the banners were more tattered. The occasional bright, new, gaily coloured blocks of flats only heightened the contrast.

We passed the high rise workers apartments of Hohenschonhausen that serviced the industrial area of Weissensee and headed towards the more rural districts of Wartenberg and Falkenberg. We passed streets that were numbers and houses that were spaced further apart.

Finally, the road was bordered only by fields. Somewhere past the Dorfstrasse intersection I stopped.

28

IT WAS UNNATURALLY quiet. On either side the fields stretched whitely into the darkness. The rustles and snappings of the night filled the car. I checked the map against the light from the dashboard and then reaching behind me handed the Marquesa the red phosphorescent triangle.

"Walk fifty paces down the road and leave this where it can be seen."

"Fifty paces?"

"All right, forty." Traffic was so light and travelling so slowly even fifteen would have done.

The Marquesa zipped up her anorak and tied a scarf firmly on her head. Then she stepped outside in a blast of arctic air.

When I couldn't see the Marquesa any more I reached forward and threw the hazard warning switch. It came to life with an explosive click. Amber light rippled along the car. I picked up the special hydraulic jack and stepped into the freezing slush.

The cold was deathly, chilled steel, piercing through to the marrow. My breath turned to smoke and the skin on my face grew pinched. It was the kind of cold in which you had to keep moving or freeze solid.

I walked carefully over the snow packed ice and squatted by the rear wheel. I tugged my collar as high as it would go, and removing a glove, used the round headed key I had been given to extract the tyre valve.

The tyre deflated with a loud prolonged hiss, the car settling down softly on the wheel trim. My face scraped along the rough wetness of the road as I crept under the car and pushed the jack under the axle.

I opened the boot and took out the wheelbrace. I slipped the gloves on again and jammed the brace against the wheel nuts,

The brace felt spongy through the gloves and the brace skidded off the nuts. But it was impossible to work barehanded. In those temperatures flesh could adhere to metal. Bracing my knee, forcing the weight of my body on to the cross of the brace, I grunted and turned.

"*Was ist denn los?*"

The man had emerged out of the fields like a shadow. A tall man in a dark shiny raincoat, incandescent in the flashing amber of the hazard light. He was clutching a small bundle and wore a black motorcyclist's cap, low down over his face. Large button eyes glinted under the cap, a thin twisted mouth emerged from the turned up coat collar. A rim of white hair glistened and his boots were muddy as if he had walked some distance over rough ground.

I pointed to the tyre. There was no sign yet of the Marquesa. At least Heller was on time.

"*Kann ich Ihnen helfen?*" he said.

I stood up and pointed to the wheelbrace drooping against the nuts. It was right I thought that Heller should do some of the work.

I could hear the Marquesa's footsteps, over the clink of the wheelbrace. I unclipped the spare wheel and lifted it out of the boot letting it bounce springily on the road. Catching the tyre again I leaned it against the car and watched Heller stooping over the rear wheel, his shiny coat streaked with amber, till the Marquesa emerged out of the darkness.

"Heller," she said.

The man looked up, dropping the wheelbrace with a clatter.

"I am the Marquesa de Maerez. I was married to Gerhardt Niefeld."

Heller came upright slowly. "You have the documents?"

She showed him a wedding photograph, everyone's expressions curiously formal. She showed him a death certificate and Heller had trouble reading Spanish. Then she showed him her own passport and the one that had belonged to de Maerez.

Heller was still hesitant. "You come from friends?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Friends."

He looked at me.

"This is Nicholas Maasten," the Marquesa said, "he has a lot of experience in taking people out of East Berlin."

"Will it be safe?" Heller asked me.

"As houses," I said and finished changing the wheel.

* * *

I put the deflated tyre back and unscrewed the top of the false petrol tank. "You travel in here," I said. The hole gaped black and amber.

Heller nodded.

"There is one thing more," I said, "how did you get the remaining shares in Odessa?"

"Nicholas!" The Marquesa cried. "There is time for that afterwards."

I ignored her. "Talk," I said in German. "Talk or I'll send for the Vopos."

Heller replied in German too. "I have no shares," he said, "I only know where to find them."

He was, I decided, too frightened to do anything but tell the truth.

29

We drove back to the centre, towards the checkpoint, along narrow streets measured by dingy street lamps, past darkened buildings, with crumbling walls and shuttered windows. The sky was bright with the light from the arc lamps and to the west pinpoints of red flickered against the velvet night, as a jet trailed over Tempelhof.

We drove past Treptow Park and the U-Bahn clattering on the further side. Freedom, I thought, lay beyond. Beyond the razed street before the wall and the ditches patrolled by Alsatian dogs, beyond the minefields with their concrete crosses, and the dried wreaths, placed against the roughened niches of the Wall.

Forty yards from the crossing point I slowed the car right down, driving by parking lamps only. Bauman had said that in the vicinity of the Wall, the Vopos had orders to shoot on sight. Further up the road, I stubbed out my cigarette and turned on the car's interior light.

The road was badly lit and as we crawled slowly along it I was horribly aware of the unseen eyes studying us through night glasses, of the unseen gun barrels pointing at our hearts.

We came into the arc of the floodlamps where the concrete islands began. My heart felt thick and heavy beating fearfully in my throat as I twisted the car round the obstacles and braked gently to a stop outside the Kontrol hut.

It was warm inside the hut and there was the usual queue of persons with the same dull patient faces and the same bored stares as they gazed at portraits of Ulbricht. We handed in our passports and completed the currency declaration. This time we had little to say to each other.

Outside two Vopos were circling round the Toronado like anxious dogs.

I forced myself to look away, feeling the sweat start out all over my body, feeling the claustrophobic heat of the low roofed hut. I reached for a cigarette, remembered smoking was *verboten* and chewed a match instead. I hoped I looked bored. I tried to set my face in a dull patient glaze. I wanted to look normal. Beside me the Marquesa began filing a fingernail.

From time to time cars swept silently past the window, their metal bodies luminescent in the reflection of the arc lamps. People entered the hut, glanced anxiously at the notices, formed queues. Footsteps rang out hollowly on the wooden floor as they walked in the narrow area between the benches.

We waited.

In the car park outside the Toronado jutted beyond the line of Cologne-made Fords and Dusseldorf-made Opels. The Toronado was bigger and brighter, and painted fiesta yellow. It stood out like the Queen Mary in drydock. The Vopos were still looking at it with interest.

* * *

When we came out of the hut forty minutes later the Vopos were still there. The arc lights bathed the car park in a white even light, and beyond them a searchlight flickered as it caressed the darkened Wall.

The Vopos waited for us impassively, hands looped casually into their belts, not too far away from the leather pistol holsters with open flaps.

This is it, I thought, this is really it. They know. Heller must have moved inside the car, thumped, maybe even screamed. The car had been stationary for nearly forty minutes. Heller would be starting to die.

I could feel my legs quivering, as we walked across the flat white lit space.

One of the Vopos moved in front of us. "*Amerikan?*" he asked.

"*Nein. Ich bin britisch, aber meine Freundin ist eine Spanierin.*"

Without a flicker of expression the Vopo corrected my pronunciation.

He led the way to the car. He rapped on the bonnet. "*Offen,*" he said.

The second Vopo stood behind us, where he could watch us and look into the car.

I leaned into the car and pulled the bonnet catch. The huge squat bonnet lifted upwards, throwing a dark shadow over the driving compartment. The first Vopo moved forward to look. I tried to look with him but the second Vopo placed his hand on my arm warning me to stand still.

I stood still. It seemed an eternity.

Finally the bonnet clanged shut and the first Vopo led the way to the boot. The key scraped against the metal as I opened it.

"You have no air?"

"What?" I felt I must have jumped at least six feet.

"You have no air for the tyre."

I felt my face crack into a smile. "I had a puncture."

The guard tapped the carpet, looked suspiciously at its dampness. Then he turned away. The second Vopo caught my arm again, motioning me to wait.

The first Vopo returned a few minutes later, wheeling a trolley that looked like a portable hydraulic jack. Except, all the way along the base, where there should have been a piston and a lifting arm, there was a mirror. The whole device was battery operated. The Vopo got the trolley under the boot and pressed a switch. The mirror turned quite brilliant with light.

Two more Vopos came across and joined us with a picture of the Toronado. One of them had a book. He climbed into the car, turned on the interior light and began removing the rear seat.

I could feel my stomach going all soft on me. My heart was thudding like a trip hammer and each beat sent a dull wave of pain surging through my head. My mouth was completely dry.

They were measuring the interior dimensions. The floor, I knew, was higher than normal. Bauman had said the East Germans would not notice. Had he been lying then? I had been foolish to have believed that the East Germans didn't have detailed specifications of the car. Worse than foolish! Stupid!

The man with the trolley mirror was edging it slowly along the underside of the chassis, studying the reflection of the axle and the springs through a series of mirrors along the handle. Every now and then he stopped and looked hard at the reflection.

Heller's body could have broken the tunnel, a bit of clothing could have caught somewhere revealing everything. I tried to tell myself that everything was normal, that it would be all right.

But I wasn't very convincing. The most terrible thing, I discovered, about being scared is not having anywhere to run to.

The men moved the mirror to the front of the car. I sighed audibly. My own personal Vopo moved.

"Cold," I said to him. "Cold," and rubbed my hands together to demonstrate. The Vopo looked away. In a few minutes I thought it would be over.

The man who had been taking measurements climbed out. The trolley was now under the front bumpers. Then one of the Vopos standing by the boot prodded the tail light cluster. His finger came away covered with white powder.

He waved the finger in front of my nose as if it were a rare insect. Mixed with the white powder were yellow flakes of paint.

"You have accident? Yes?"

I forced the words out on a thickening tongue. "No," I said. "Rust," and translated quickly. "*Rost.*"

"Yankee bodywork no good?" the Vopo asked.

"Yankee bodywork is bloody terrible," I said, relief flooding through me like water from a burst dam. I even promised myself that if I got out of this I would buy myself a Skoda.

* * *

Afterwards the tension went so quickly that I had to force myself to drive slowly around the concrete blocks. I wanted to sing, to scream, to dance. I was laughing hysterically when I handed our passports to the American at Checkpoint Charlie.

As soon as I got across the Kochstrasse I took the first turning right. I double parked the Toronado and went round to the back and opened the boot.

Heller came out slowly, breathing hard, redfaced, still alive. Gratefully he took my hand and climbed over the boot sill. He took out his small bundle, stood upright and stretched, an expression of ecstatic happiness flitting across his face as he looked up at the red tinged sky and the blue letters of a neon sign. He breathed deeply and grabbed hold of my hand. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you."

"I thought you might have suffocated in there," I said.

He laughed. "I have good lungs," he said. "I am a diver."

I stared at him in amazement. The characters from Niefeld's notebook were coming alive. With an effort I pointed to the car. "Get in," I said. "There are some people who want to see you."

* * *

The Strasse des 17 Juni stretches across the Tiergarten from the Brandenburg Gate to the Ernst Reuter Platz. It is so wide it perpetually looks empty. It is bordered by the disciplined English parkland of the Tiergarten, and is capable of carrying six streams of traffic. Halfway along its length is the Grosser Stern with its statues of Bismarck and Rouen and Moltke. From the Grosser Stern to the Brandenburg Tor the road does not really go anywhere. There were only a handful of tourists looking up at the floodlit magnificence of the Brandenburg Gate.

I cruised slowly along until I saw Patrick's MGB; I flashed my lights twice and pulled up behind it.

"Wait here," I said to the Marquesa.

She protested, "But this isn't—"

"It won't take a second," I assured her and climbed out of the car.

I checked the registration of the MGB and tapped lightly on the window. Patrick, seated behind the wheel, didn't move. I jerked the door open. Patrick spilled out like rubbish from a ruptured sack.

The left side of his face was soaked with a dark wetness. A boot buckle gleamed brightly in the light from the street lamp. My stomach heaved and then I heard the sound of footsteps behind me. I was still turning when something hard and solid smashed into the back of my skull and my face plunged through the brittle iciness of the snow.

There were footsteps all around me thudding into my brain. I could hear voices, the slam of car doors.

The Marquesa was shouting, "Heller, run, run."

Other voices, guttural, German, shouted, "Get her, get him."

A boot smashed the snow near my face. I tried to twist up to shout to the Marquesa.

Then there was a voice, softer, but more powerful than the rest, a voice as insidious as a Berlin prostitute's, "*Komm Süsser.*" "*Heller,*" it cried, "*Heller, Komm zurück. Ich bin's, Beck.*"

The footsteps stopped, except for a single running beat.
The Marquesa screamed, "Heller, come back."
Then there was the angry bark of a tiny pistol.
And silence.

Part Six

30

We took the first flight out of Berlin. Neither Beck nor Heller were on it. The soft scream of the engine attacked my pulsating head and below us the clouds were like grey lint. I saw very little of Germany.

The Marquesa lit a fresh cigarette and turned to me. "Who was the man in the sportscar, Nicholas?" she asked. "The man you were taking Heller to?" They were almost the first words she had spoken since the previous night.

"A friend of Robey's," I said. "He was paying the expenses of getting Heller out. It seemed only fair that he should be able to to talk to him."

"Was he a friend of yours?"

I nodded. "We were in Africa together."

She smoked in silence for a while. The steward came round taking orders for drinks. We climbed higher and a bright wintry sun came through the window. The plane bucketed in an air current.

"You worked for them?" she said. It was a statement. Her voice was bitter.

"I had to," I said. "It was blackmail. You don't think I would have done what I did for one thousand pounds, do you?"

"No," she said. "I suppose not."

Again the silence. Then she asked, "What will you do now?"

"Try to find Heller," I said. There was nothing that Carruthers could do about the five thousand pound bank draft. I had already express mailed it to my bank in Zürich. But I would have to give him Heller. Carruthers always insisted that you fulfilled your part of the bargain.

"You will go to Bodenroche?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"You can dive?"

"If I have to."

She smiled and her hand touched mine. "I still need a bodyguard," she said. "We will go together."

I sighed. If I refused she would only get awkward. All it needed was a discreet phone call to the Swiss Police and I could be questioned for two days. Mind you, she could be in trouble too. But Carruthers wasn't expecting *her* to deliver Heller.

"Alright," I said. I would get Robey to follow us to Bodenroche. Then once I found Heller, it would become his problem.

* * *

The plane thudded down on the runway, braked, screeched with the ear-piercing wail of jet engines in reverse thrust. Velvet claws stabbed at the wheels, the landscape slowed to rectangular buildings and scurrying yellow Volkswagens. We taxied to the terminal, accompanied by a subdued sighing, and stopped. There was an impatient pause as gangways rumbled up to the plane. We stepped out into the razor-thin, antiseptic air of Switzerland.

"Staying long, Mr. Maasten?" the immigration officer asked. He didn't like my dark glasses or the bloodshot eyes underneath them. He liked the bump on my head even less.

I gave him the flash mac grin. "No," I said. "I used to work for Rolls Royce. Can't stand the sound of ticking clocks."

For that he looked me up in the black ledger immigration officers read instead of Fanny Hill.

"I don't like chocolates either," I said.

He gave me the cold dead-eyed look. "You should have stayed in England," he said. "There you can get high on the National Health."

"Not any more," I said. "Now we've got to buy them, like any self-respecting Swiss."

He hesitated, wondering whether to make an issue of it and decided not to. He pushed my passport at me. I took it and moved on, waiting while he drooled over the Marquesa's *laissez passer*. No-one appreciates aristocracy more than a republican.

"The trouble with you, Nicholas," the Marquesa said, as we walked unsteadily over the ice and packed snow towards the Alfa, "is that you always try to be funny."

"Not funny," I said. "Hip."

She wrestled with the frozen lock and opened the car. I brushed packed snow off the windscreen with the edge of my glove.

The Marquesa said, "He was only doing his job."

"So was Hitler," I said and climbed into the car.

Inside it was like a damp refrigerator. Condensation covered the windows and the cold went right through to the marrow.

"He might not have let you into Switzerland," she said.

"So what?" I asked. "We are going to Austria."

She gave me a faint grin. "That's what you think," she said.

She started the car and drove slowly out of the car park. At the exit she turned right. Austria was the other way.

"We're going to Zürich," the Marquesa said.

"What on earth for?"

The Marquesa said, "I want to see Rudi Legermann."

* * *

She found a gap in the traffic and accelerated smoothly onto the autoroute. Damp spray hissed from underneath the tyres.

"Look," I said. "Legermann will keep for later."

"I want to see him now."

"You haven't got time to be passionate. And you can't do it in a bank."

She turned to me and smiled. "How the hell do you know?" she asked.

I fumbled for a cigarette, lit it and glared morosely at the traffic speeding through the grey afternoon light. "It's important that we find Heller," I said.

"After," the Marquesa said, "I've seen Rudi."

I shrugged. There are times when it is impossible to be logical with a woman.

She drove straight to the Savoy. "First, I am going to have lunch," she said. "You take the car, have it checked and meet me outside Legermann & Cie in exactly two hours."

"Would you like me to wear a uniform and a peaked cap?"

"No," she said, "just be outside the bank in two hours."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

She leaned across and kissed me lightly on the mouth. "Keep your cool, man," she said and climbed out of the car.

I groaned. There was no fun in both of us being hip.

* * *

I spent most of the next hour trying to contact Elmer. The young pilot who was covering the office didn't know where he was and couldn't care less. All he wanted to do was to listen to Carole King on his duty-free Japanese cassette recorder and talk about Dakotas. I spent forty minutes waiting for Elmer and then left him a note. I had lunch, and had the car checked.

Exactly two hours after I had dropped the Marquesa at the Savoy, I parked the Alfa behind the puke-green Lamborghini Espada. Forty-five minutes after that I was still sitting there, blanketed from the street by misted up windows and listening to a hysterical babble of German on the radio. The air inside the car was stale and smelt of trapped tobacco smoke. I climbed out of the car and began to walk along the pavement in front of the bank.

The doors leading to the bank were shut in accordance with a notice that said the bank closed sharp at 4 p.m. There were few people in the street and an icy wind whipped through the narrow gaps between the buildings. I wondered where on earth the Marquesa had got to and what she was doing with Rudi Legermann. I turned up my coat collar, thrust my hands deep into my pockets and stared at a record shop window on the opposite side of the street.

The bank was over a restaurant, whose imitation vine leaves twisted around the entrance pillars. It looked like one of those places where you paid handsomely for inferior decor and food that was worse. Lights, however glowed invitingly from within. The coffee I felt couldn't be bad. I went in, glimpsing cold charcoal grills and a revolving donner kebab.

"Hello, Nicholas," Dael said from a table in the corner.

She looked as desirable as ever. She was wearing the same suede jacket and brown corduroy jeans she had worn in de Maerez. I went over. "What are you doing here?" I asked. "I thought you'd still be diving."

"We dive again tomorrow," Ashraf said. "Today we rest."

The waiter brought us all coffee. It was thick and sweet, filled with grounds.

"Find anything?" I asked.

"No," Ashraf said. "It is very difficult to find anything in that lake. It has a false bottom, like quicksand."

I lit a cigarette and looked out of the window. From where I sat I had a good view of the entrance to the bank.

"What were you doing pacing up and down the street?" Dael asked.

"Waiting for a friend," I said.

"Ah!" she said. "That's nice." She leaned across and looked into my coffee cup. "Shall I tell your fortune?"

"Only if it is good."

Dael peered into my coffee cup. "You are going to collect a lot of stamps," she said. "Ah! You will be rich and there are," she paused, "three women in your life. All beautiful. I see a white motorcar and snow and share certificates at the bottom of a lake."

But I wasn't looking at her or the coffee grounds anymore. A thin stoop-shouldered man was coming into the restaurant. His clothes hung on him and a heavy wad of plaster covered his nose. He walked slowly but there was a certainty in his step as he looked round the restaurant, walked over to a distant table and sat down.

"Don't look now," I said to Dael, "but underneath that nose mask is Jacob Horowitz."

Dael turned and looked. "Where?" she asked.

Horowitz was looking at us, cool, flat, with the musing politeness of a person in an unfamiliar restaurant.

"It isn't Horowitz," Ashraf said. "Horowitz is still in hospital."

I might have believed that if at that moment two other men hadn't walked in. They were slim, strong-looking men with tight, dark curly hair and sun-browned faces. They were wearing dark green anoraks and each of them carried a small parcel. They looked seasoned, well-travelled men, tough as tensile steel. They glanced cursorily at us, nodded to Horowitz and picked a table to themselves.

"Friends?" I enquired.

"When are you going back to England?" Dael asked.

"Soon," I said. "Soon." Hopefully.

Three more men came in. They had the same sun-browned faces, the same tough appearance. One of them wore dirty calf-length boots and carried a coil of rope around his shoulder. He looked as if he was about to go mountaineering.

Behind them came a shorter man, carrying a large grip. He smiled shyly at all of us and joined the first group.

Ashraf said: "Would you like more coffee?"

I shook my head. "I am sure there is something at the bottom of the lake," I said.

"Maybe," Ashraf replied. "Maybe. If it is there we will find it tomorrow."

Dael asked, "Will you go back to the antique shop? Or will you take up flying again?"

"Antiques," I said, watching the four men who now came in. They looked very much like the others, lean, tough with a cold determination in their eyes. They too found themselves a separate table. The bags that two of them carried had a familiar shape. They were of such a peculiar shape and of such an unusual size to be anything else. Uzis, I thought. Uzis, the only collapsible sub-machine-guns in the world.

"Looks like a Bar Mitzvah," I said. "I should have brought a fountain pen."

"What for a fountain pen?" Dael asked.

"For a present," I said.

"That is not funny," Dael said.

I didn't say anything. The seriousness of the situation had begun to dawn on me. I looked round the restaurant at Jacob Horowitz and the ten tough men. I remembered Cherbourg and thought they couldn't have come after the Swiss Navy. They'd come, I thought, to tow away the Bank of Legermann & Cie to Israel.

At that moment the Marquesa came out of the bank. She stood on the pavement looking up and down the street.

"My friend," I said and stood up. "See you later."

"*Shalom*," said Dael.

I went out and climbed into the car. "Everything alright with Legermann?" I asked.

"He's as well as can be expected," the Marquesa said.

I started the car and drove slowly down the street. If Horowitz and the rest of Cover 12 robbed the bank, all hell would break loose. There hadn't been a bank robbery in Switzerland for thirty years and in Switzerland, bank robbery was akin to murder.

I slowed the car down by a telephone box and stopped.

"What are you doing?" the Marquesa asked.

"I have to make a phone call," I said.

The effect of the phone call was tremendous. Within seconds, the street filled with the sound of wailing sirens. Roof lights flashing, police cars skidded in all directions, jostling down the narrow street. An ambulance passed along the pavement and from somewhere a red salvage truck gave off petulant screams. I laughed as I climbed back into the car. Uniformed figures were pouring into the bank.

"Nicholas," the Marquesa asked, white faced. "What's going on?"

I smiled reassuringly at her. "Nothing," I said, "I think someone's trying to rob the bank."

"Madre Dios!" the Marquesa breathed. "Let's get out of here fast."

31

I BOUNCED THE Alfa down the street, chanced a set of traffic lights, slithered into the Banhofstrasse and drove as quickly as I could towards the autoroute. As soon as we left Zürich it started to snow, thick solid flakes, nearly as big as a man's fist, piling up on the road in front of us, reducing visibility to a dancing flecked curtain halfway along the beam of our headlamps. Driving quickly was impossible.

As we whined through the steadily falling snow, I turned to the Marquesa and asked: "What happened with Rudi Legermann?"

"A hell of a lot," she said.

* * *

The Marquesa said, "I was very nervous when I got to the bank. Even the brandies I had had with my lunch didn't help much. The vast expanse of gleaming floor as I stepped out of the lift, and the whole air of automatic efficient industry frightened me even more. All round me machines were chattering, and there was a horrible animosity about those polished wooden counters and those shiny toughened glass partitions. All I wanted to do was turn around and walk straight out of the bank. If the clerk hadn't spoken to me at that moment, I might have done precisely that.

I was standing there, having ceased to believe in what I was about to do when the clerk repeated: 'Madam?'

'I want—wanted to open an account,' I said. I wasn't handling this at all well. 'It's a large account,' I added hopefully. The young man smiled. He was terribly supercilious. 'Of course, madam, would you come this way please.'

He led the way to a space at the counter where we were not separated by glass. 'Now,' he said smiling, 'you want to open an account?'

I hesitated. 'Perhaps,' I said, 'as it is such a large account, perhaps I should talk to someone more senior.'

The clerk laughed easily. 'How much would you like to start the account with?' he asked.

'About ten million francs,' I said.

'Oh, yes,' the clerk said and looked round. Then he looked back at me and said: 'Ten million Swiss francs?'

'Yes,' I said.

'I see,' the clerk replied and looked anxiously along the counter, 'you should see Herr Stofel.'

I didn't want to see Herr Stofel. Everything I had planned depended on my seeing Legermann. 'As it is such a large account,' I told the clerk, 'perhaps I should see Herr Legermann.'

'He's at lunch,' the clerk said.

I knew that. I had sat behind him at the Savoy and had only left when he had. The lift doors whirred open.

'There he is,' I cried, 'he is just coming in.'

The clerk hesitated. 'I don't know. He may be busy.'

'Ask him,' I said.

The clerk left me and hurried over to Legermann. For a few minutes they spoke and then Legermann saw me. Smiling, preceding the clerk, he came up to me, hand outstretched. 'My dear Marquesa,' he cried. His hand was soft and clammy. 'What can I do for you?'

There was an acidic aroma of wine on his breath and his face was flushed and shiny. I smiled at him. 'I would like to open an account with you,' I said. 'Perhaps we could talk it over in private.'

He took me to his office on the floor above the main floor of the bank. 'Sit down,' he said, 'do sit down. Please make yourself comfortable.'

I could see the very idea of obtaining a large new account was making him nervous. I was worried that he would summon Stofel. Stofel would be sober and shrewd enough to realise what I was trying to do. I breathed a sigh of relief when Rudi walked over to the cocktail cabinet and took out a bottle of Remy Martin.

'Would you . . .' he asked, pouring the brandy into a glass.

'If it is permitted,' I said.

Rudi laughed. 'It is not permitted,' he said, 'not during working hours.'

I laughed. 'If we drink during working hours,' I said, 'I promise we won't work during drinking hours.'

Rudi laughed. He carried the drinks over to the desk and sat down. 'Now,' he said smiling at me, 'what can I do for you?'

I gave him a list of Alfonso's investments, 'I need bankers who can give me expert advice,' I said. 'I need bankers who are totally discreet.'

Rudi glanced from the list to me. His eyes wandered greedily over my body. With most men their eyes flicker over you and they look away. Rudi's eyes stayed.

'It will be a pleasure to look after Royalty,' he said slowly.

I laughed. The room with its delicately curved furniture, its solidity, its impression of authority and power was making me feel nervous again. I felt I had to say something quickly, before all credibility went. 'You're different,' I said, 'from other bankers.'

Rudi's smile grew wider. 'What's wrong with that?'

I pretended to look embarrassed. 'You're very young,' I said, 'much too young for all this responsibility.'

Rudi laughed and ruffled his hair. That made him look even younger. 'Everyone says that,' he said, 'as if being young were a crime.'

'Not a crime,' I said, 'just unexpected.'

Rudi reached for his box of cigars. 'I am,' he said smiling, 'terribly, terribly discreet.'

He waited while I took out a cigarette and he lit it for me. He went through a great ceremony of preparing a cigar and asked: 'Now about this account you wish to open? It is really ten million Swiss francs?'

'More,' I said. 'The ten million is only cash. The investments come to another hundred.'

'Who are your present bankers?'

'I'd rather not say,' I smiled to take away the sting of distrust. 'I wish to keep my affairs as secret as possible. I will tell you who my present bankers are after we have agreed to do business together.'

Rudi poured brandy into the glasses. 'Let's drink to that,' he said.

Rudi spent a good twenty minutes studying the list of investments. He looked up and said, 'This list, it bears no imprint of either a stockbroker or a bank.'

'I know,' I said, 'I told you I value discretion. What do you think about the investments?'

'It's a reasonable portfolio,' Rudi said.

'It only gives me a return of four per cent,' I pointed out. 'Can you guarantee me more?'

Rudi puffed at his cigar. 'Yes,' he said. 'I can guarantee you twice as much.'

'What about the ten million cash? What do you suggest I do with that?'

'I think you should leave it on long term deposit with us.'

We looked at each other. Rudi's glance was hot, almost feverish, as if the thought of all this money in cash and securities was too much for him. 'We will pay you twice as much as any other bank in Zürich.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Because we make more profit than any of the others.'

'That,' I said, 'is most interesting.' I'd always known that Alfonso had thought Legermann & Cie were singularly unprofitable.

Rudi smiled at me. He refilled our glasses. 'Tomorrow,' he said, 'I will give you a revised list of investments that will earn you at least ten per cent.' He leaned across the desk. 'Tonight,' he said, 'I will take you to dinner in Berne.'

'That would be very nice,' I said, 'but first, we must finish our business.'

'Quite right,' Rudi said and tried to look serious.

'I must be sure about your discretion,' I said. 'Your systems? How foolproof are they?'

'Totally foolproof.'

I stood up. 'Show me,' I said, 'how my identity will be protected.'

We went down to the banking floor. It was empty. Alternate lighting blazed over shrouded machines and bare desks. A mop and a bucket stood by the lift door and there was a pungent smell of disinfectant.

'Here,' Rudi said and stopped, surprised at his voice echoing in the emptiness. He gave me a ledger card. 'See if you can tell whose account that is.'

The card was a grey oblong, punctured with square perforations. There were columns of figures headed by the words Soll and Haben and Saldo. On the top right hand corner of the card were the words Konto followed by a row of figures.

'You see,' Rudi said, 'No one knows.'

'Except everybody who works here,' I said. I put the card away and looked up at Rudi. 'I insist on absolute secrecy. Absolute, inviolate secrecy. I thought I had made that quite clear.'

'It can be arranged,' Rudi said, 'that the clerks only have access to your numbered signature.'

'That's an improvement,' I said, 'and who would have access to my mandate card?'

'They would be stored in our vaults,' Rudi said. 'Then only the directors of the Bank would know who you are.'

I smiled at him. 'May I see?'

'Of course,' Rudi said and led the way to the lift.

We went down to the basement where the safe deposits were. It was a large room running the length of the building filled with row upon row of what looked like filing cabinets, made of fire-proof steel and embedded in the floor. Each box was secured with a combination type lock.

It was like a morgue, except instead of corpses there were documents and gold bars and jewellery and secrets. Each box was numbered.

'You could,' Rudi said, 'leave some of your assets in one of these boxes. No-one would know.'

'Except the directors.' I smiled. 'How safe are they?'

'You wouldn't find more trustworthy persons.'

'And if I open an account where would the master list of numbers be kept?'

'In here,' Rudi said pointing to an extra large deposit box.

'Who has the keys to this?' I asked.

Rudi shrugged: 'The directors.'

'You. Do they trust you with such a key?'

'Of course,' he said.

Fumbling with his key ring he opened the box. Lying in there amongst a number of envelopes were three bound folders. They were loose leaf folders marked with letters of the alphabet. I picked out 'H – R' and almost casually flicked through it. After a while I replaced the folder.

'I am very impressed,' I said. 'Now if I opened an account with you my personal details would be in there and,' I looked around the room, 'my assets would be in one of your little boxes. Is that right?'

'And only the directors would know,' Rudi said. 'And they are most discreet.'

'Who would have the key to the deposit box?' I asked.

'The owner.'

'Doesn't the bank keep one? In case of need?'

'That is correct.'

'Interesting,' I said. 'You mean you could open any of the boxes here?'

Rudi shrugged. 'I would need my co-directors' permission,' he said. 'It would be most improper otherwise.'

'I agree,' I said. I gave him a small smile. 'I suppose I shall have to learn to trust you.'

Rudi finished locking the master deposit box and turned to me. 'I will make it easy for you to do that,' he promised.

I pointed to a section of the room cordoned off by thick iron bars. 'What's there?'

'The vault,' Rudi said. 'That's where the real money is. The bank's money. We have separate keys and two directors must be present before it can be opened.' He began to walk towards the bars. 'This is quite foolproof too,' he said. 'The walls are of concrete and the bars are electrically wired to the police station. If I were to touch them the police would be here in fifteen seconds.'

'Don't,' I said.

Rudi stopped and turned, the laughter draining out of his face.

You see, Nicholas, I had opened my handbag and this time I had taken out the Derringer. It is the ideal lady's gun but nice ladies don't use firearms.

I pointed the Derringer directly at Rudi's stomach.

'I would like to examine deposit box 7126154/Z2T/LAR/125.' "

* * *

Even though it was cold in the car, I had broken into a sweat. My heart started to thump slowly and steadily, each beat seeming to fill the chest cavity. My foot on the accelerator was trembling.

"What did you do with Legermann?"

"I cut the telephone wire and bound him with that."

I groaned. That constituted armed robbery with violence. I could see each of us getting a minimum of fifteen years, when they found us.

"I also gagged him with his tie," the Marquesa said.

To take my mind off the fifteen-year gaol sentence, I asked, "What did you find in the bank?"

"This," she said pulling out a bulky envelope from her handbag.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. I haven't looked yet."

The Marquesa turned on the interior light and began to look at the documents she had taken from the Odessa deposit box.

I drove on as quickly as I dared. I couldn't get to Austria fast enough.

32

Once we reached the mountains, the snow cleared and we were able to travel more quickly. Even so it was well after ten o'clock when we reached Bodenroche.

The Marquesa stuffed the Odessa documents back into the envelope and pushed it under the seat.

"Find the missing share certificate?" I asked.

She shook her head.

I decided to forget about the share certificate and concentrate on getting Heller.

I killed the headlamps and stretched. Driving even an Alfa on slippery roads wasn't the easiest task in the world, especially if you happened to have been hit across the back of the head the night before. The Marquesa was already out of the car, standing by the guard rail at the edge of the parking lot. She was looking down the cliff edge at the lake.

I opened the door of the Alfa. Her voice was low and urgent.

"Nicholas," she whispered, "come here."

I joined her at the guard rail. Below us was the lake, vast and dark and glistening. Except right in the middle where there was a pool of filtered light. It looked as if the lake was being tunnelled through from the bottom.

I climbed back into the Alfa. "Let's take a closer look," I said.

They were diving down there in the lake. And if they were diving Heller had to be around.

* * *

We coasted down to the far side of the lake with no engine and no lights. When the road ran out we rolled onto the beach,

jolting over hard ice and snow. There was no moon and the night sky was clouded. I could barely make out the deeper shadows of the huts.

I went quickly to the hut where Ashraf and Dael had stowed their equipment. The Yale locks were still on the door. It was a matter of seconds to borrow the Marquesa's Derringer and blast through the locks. The reports were no louder than asthmatic coughs.

Once inside I dressed hurriedly, wriggling into the stiff rubber suit, drawing on the Neoprene gloves. I fastened the double edged Grisbi to the sheath strapped to my leg.

The Marquesa helped me carry the Mistral Slim Twin oxygen cylinders to the lake's edge and then to manhandle the UPU across the ice.

"I'll wait here for you," she said.

"It will be cold."

"I'll keep warm."

I turned round so that she could place the oxygen cylinders against my back. The weight pulled my shoulders straight. I fastened them quickly and checked the cylinders for draw. Then pushing the UPU in front of me I moved onto the brittle ice that edged the lake like scum round the edge of a cutter.

The flippers were no help at all on the slippery surface and once, I fell, bursting through the ice, seeing the UPU bob in front of me like a surfacing porpoise. When the water was waist high I started the engine. It gave off a low hissing whine like a milk float. I set my stop watch and plummeted blindly on through the murk.

My face froze and my body grew cold as layers of still water chilled the rubber suit. The water was alive with a kind of black iridescence. Clammy tendrils brushed my face mask and the pressure built up around me, filling my ears with the gurgling sounds of compression. I kept going down and down. It seemed like an eternity before the hand on the stop watch reached the halfway mark and I turned on the search light.

Almost at once I saw I had made a mistake. My descent had been angled too steeply and the bulbous nose of the propulsion unit was only feet away from the bottom. I throttled back frantically, throwing my weight onto the rear of the unit, trying to lift the blunt nose upwards. But it was too late. The torpedo-like nose of the UPU hit the bottom. Yet I, bracing myself for the shock, felt nothing.

The bottom was a pressure-packed mass of leaves and wood and rubbish, bonded together by years of abandonment, about as substantial as quicksand. Shreds of mucus-like matter floated about the nose of the unit. My weight was already tilting the unit upwards. I remembered what Ashraf had said about the false bottom and steered to where I thought I'd seen the light.

33

IT TOOK ME twenty minutes to find it, the pinpoint that grew to a deep, wide vertical shaft of light, blazing down from the surface. I turned off my own searchlights and cut the engines, drifting into the translucence surrounding the shaft.

Working right in the middle of the beam of light, about forty feet below the surface was a diver. By him on a separate trolley was oxy-acetylene cutting equipment. He had a torch fixed to his helmet, and in the light of the flood lamps he was trying to free a box, about two foot by one foot that was trapped in the cables of a steel hawser.

The diver was dressed in free diving gear. He too had a sheath knife clipped to his leg and somewhat strangely a hydraulically operated short barrelled speargun slung around his shoulders.

The UPU drifted slowly upwards.

From time to time a streak of orange flame darted over the box. The diver was careful to see that he didn't burn away the hawser too quickly and allow the box to plummet to the bottom of the lake. He worked neatly, like a professional should.

I drifted closer, wondering why the man had brought a speargun. As I watched the diver rested the torch on the trolley and unslung the speargun from around his shoulders. I watched fascinated. An Austrian lake in winter was no place for spear fishing. Perhaps the diver was going to shoot through the hawser.

A split second later I realised that the diver wasn't going to shoot through the hawser. A split second later I realised that the diver was going to shoot at me.

I fumbled for the start button and nearly fell off the UPU. The unit ducked and bobbed in the water with my struggles as I tried to pull it round pointing away from the diver. It moved clumsily like a waterlogged tree trunk. Behind me the diver was coming up

as if he had been fired from a cannon. His speargun was held out before him and he was already in range before I realised I was in the wrong position. The UPU should have been between the speargun and me.

Hurriedly I tried to pull it round again. It felt heavier than before and twice as clumsy. I nearly swallowed my mouth-piece in anxiety. The diver was slowing down now, taking aim. I tried to curl into a ball behind the squat bomb-like shape of the UPU. It seemed that I had arms and legs sticking out everywhere. I jabbed the starter button again. The engine and the diver fired at the same time.

I felt the harpoon hit with a clang that sent the UPU spinning. The next second there was a searing flash of pain along my outstretched left arm. The engine screeched and I was dragged downwards hanging on one-handed. We were going at a fair pace when we crashed into the diver.

I saw his head above the snout, his mouth-piece tearing into the darkness. Bubbles rippled from his mouth and I let go of the UPU, peeling off into the water. When I turned round, there was no sign of the diver or the UPU. There was only a cloud of something that looked like dust drifting from the bottom of the lake, moving slowly across the vertical shaft of light.

I waited for a while, treading water and thinking. My mouth-piece was making slurping noises, and I changed over to the other cylinder. Then I went back to the diver's platform and picked up the cutting equipment. It took me only minutes to free the box. Dragging it after me I swam slowly back to the shore.

The Marquesa was still there. She came slipping along the treacherous ice and helped me drag the box back to the cars. I peeled off my face mask and unzipped the upper part of the diving suit. My sweater and my shirt had been split open. I had a long ugly graze all the way down my arm.

"You're hurt," she said.

She had a motorist's first-aid box in the car. I told her briefly about what had happened while she cleaned the wound. It was very cold and afterwards I changed quickly.

"Let's look in the box," she said.

"Later," I said. "Let's get back to the village."

"No. Now," she already had the Derringer out and was pointing it at the lock. There was a small orange flash and I ducked. The lid of the box jerked open.

It contained about fifteen pounds of gold bars. They were greasy and looked like discoloured brass. Wedged firmly amongst the bars was a fat envelope made of oilskin. It contained a certificate entitling the bearer to 334 shares in Odessa Anstalt. There was also a more impressive-looking document. This described the founders of Odessa as Martin Bormann, Rudolph Steinmeyer and Gerhardt Niefeld—the *zessionserklärung*!

"It's all here," I said. "Everything."

From behind me, she said: "I'm glad."

Something in the way she said it made me turn round. The Marquesa still had the Derringer in her hand. It was pointing straight at me.

* * *

I was relieved that she neither shot me nor hit me over the head. The doctor in Berlin who had not completely believed my story of slipping in the bathroom, had said that I was suffering from concussion. Another blow hardly twenty-four hours later might have killed me as surely as a shot at close range from the Derringer.

She made me pack the gold bars into the spare wheel compartment of the Alfa. She herself spiked the certificates onto a rod welded onto the filler cap of the car. Then she bound my hands behind my back and lashed my ankles together. She gagged me and left me sitting upright on the UPU. Before she left she draped two blankets over me, jammed the empty box against my back, kissed me on the forehead and placed a gold bar between my knees.

Part Seven

34

It was Elmer who found me staring at a silvering sky.

"I came as soon as I could, sir. The roads were terrible."

He freed the gag and I spat into the snow.

"You're too bloody late," I said.

He loosened my wrists and ankles and I sat there feeling the pain of renewed circulation. My fingers felt like rusty wires. I told Elmer about Heller and the Marquesa.

"Too bad, sir," was all he said. "Too bad. I'll tell everyone concerned you weren't to blame."

"Do that," I said.

"The meeting is at noon," Elmer said. "I don't feel we can do anything about that."

I didn't say anything. One day, I decided, I would speak to Elmer about Carruthers.

"We'd better go," I said. "Before Beck's men come sniffing around."

Elmer squeezed my arm and led me to his Ford Capri. I got in. Then Elmer went very still as if the air outside had turned him into ice. "I'm sorry, sir," Elmer said softly, "it looks like trouble."

* * *

Trouble took the shape of five men walking across the beach towards us. Four wore the pale brown uniforms of the Austrian Police. The fifth was a lean, stringy man wearing a black suit and a black hat and the expression of an undertaker whose bill hadn't been paid. They were spread out in a wide line. The policemen, like all European policemen, carried guns.

They came up and stood in a tight circle around the Capri. As

if to reinforce their authority a sixth man came up. He had been walking on his own along the front of the lake. He wore a snappy brown suit with a sharp brimmed Tyrolean hat.

He pushed through the group and identified himself.

"Inspector Riether," he said. "Austrian Police."

"What's wrong, sir?" Elmer asked.

"Herr Stommeler will tell you," Inspector Riether said, pointing to the black garbed civilian.

Stommeler turned a stony face to Elmer. He'd woken up too early to shave and there was prickly grey stubble on his chin. "It is a question of diving into the Bodensee without a permit."

"What kind of an offence is that?" Elmer demanded. He looked round at the four policemen. "What do you do with parking offenders? Shoot them?"

Stommeler stared at him coldly.

"You don't arrest people for diving in a lake, sir!" Elmer said indignantly.

The uniformed policemen were looking at the open box. One of them pointed to the gold bar on the parcel shelf.

"We arrest people for diving in the Bodensee." Stommeler said.

"Right," I interrupted. "What's the fine?"

Stommeler turned to me with that same look of resentment and cold anger: "There is no fine. I want you to return the property you took from the lake. It belongs to the people of Bodenroche."

"And you are their custodian, sir?"

"I am the Mayor, yes."

"Congratulations," I said. Actually I was talking to myself. Without doubt Stommeler was the E—— of Niefeld's notebook.

Stommeler's face tightened. "There were two divers," he said pointedly.

"The hell with that," Elmer snapped. "You can't arrest us for diving in a lake. Now move out of the way or I'll start screaming for the U.S. Marines."

"I don't think that will do you much good," Inspector Riether said softly. "You see there is also a question of murder."

"Murder!"

"The body of a diver was found in the lake this morning. They've taken it down to the police station over there." Riether pointed across the lake. "You will please help identify the body."

"But, sir, how would we know the body?"

Inspector Riether looked at the diving suit lying on the ground

like an abandoned skin. "You might have met last night when you were diving," he said.

He turned aside, making way for Elmer to move up to the door of the car. "Let us go to the police station together," he said. "It will not take long."

"You mean we are not under arrest?" Elmer asked.

"No," Riether said, "not yet."

35

WE WERE NOT under arrest, but two of the policemen crushed into the rear of the Capri with Elmer, Riether spread himself across the front seat beside me. The others followed in an ancient Volkswagen with a rusted dent in one wing and a broken spot light.

We went through the town and were just starting the circuit of the lake when the Porsche came hurtling round the corner in a flurry of snow. I recognised the skis on the roof rack but before I could even flash my lights it had whipped past with a rush of wind and a wicked snarl of exhaust. I watched the car grow small in my rear view window, twisting its tail as it snaked round the next corner.

We drove on for about another hour. Long after we had passed the turn off to the ski hut Riether tapped my arm and pointed to a narrow break in the wall of snow. "Turn here," he said.

The car heaved on to an empty, precarious-looking track, the ice beaten and churned by the passage of many vehicles. The trail curved round the mountain. It was unfenced and on one side there was a sheer drop to the huddle of fishing huts by the lake. We were nearly at the top of the mountain when the trail flattened out, moved inland, and disappeared abruptly. Wormlike tyre tracks squirmed across the fresh snow to where a row of cars were parked beside a line of trees.

The Volkswagen pulled out and passed us, with the familiar whining clatter of a sewing-machine under stress. It drove away from the parked cars, squirming up to the shallow incline where the chalet stood. I followed, with mosquito-like protests from the Capri and much slapping of wet snow.

Halfway up the incline the Volkswagen turned round full

circle and stopped. I pulled up alongside in a wide, squelching turn. By the time I stopped Stommeler and the policeman were already out of their car. Riether opened a door of the Capri.

"The body is in the chalet," he said.

We climbed out of the car and the policemen came to stand amongst us. Two of them had their guns drawn. I stretched and looked back at the parked cars. There was a white BMW, spattered with mud and a couple of Mercs. Parked askew with a shiny new dent that curved in its offside door was a white Alfa Romeo Sprint Coupé.

"Just a sec—" I started to say.

But it was already too late. Four young men in brown anoraks and ski pants were running down the slope. They had AR–10 rifles in their hands and holsters fastened to their belts. A tall pear-shaped man emerged from the chalet behind them.

"Well done, Erich," Beck called. "Well done, Riether. You may go now. The boys will bring them up."

* * *

The four young men led us at gunpoint up the incline to the chalet. The snow closed around my thin shoes and curled insidiously between the leather and the sock. Our feet made squelching noises as we walked.

We were taken in through a side door and made to wipe our feet carefully. The chalet itself was a large triangular roofed structure built of wood and stone. Its windows were shuttered and I noticed that all the windows were at ground level, except for one, high over the front door, just beneath the apex of the pointed roof.

It was a stern unfriendly place, its stone and deep brown wood giving it the air of a fortress. Inside we were taken down a dark corridor to a large comfortably furnished room at the front of the house. A three-barred heater glowed from one wall and an imitation log fire sent out synthetic smoke from the fireplace. At the top of the room was a large desk and in front of it were three armchairs. Beside the desk was a door leading to another room.

Beck came in and stood in front of the desk.

"Mr. Maasten," he said sadly. "You should have chosen the winning side."

"Better to have played and lost than never to have played at all," I said.

He gave me a puzzled frown. I sympathised with him. I didn't understand the public school code either.

"We're supposed to be identifying a body," I said. "Where is it?"

Beck seemed amused. "Alas, we never found poor Heller," he said. He sighed. "After all his vicissitudes crossing the Wall, a watery grave." He vibrated in commiseration. "It is very sad."

Soon, I thought, he wouldn't be the only one.

Beck said, "You should never have trusted Bauman. A man who can be bought is always available to the highest bidder."

"What are you going to do with us?" I asked.

Beck smiled fondly. "Time, Mr. Maasten," he said, "time and patience." He tried to look severe, like a kindly schoolmaster faced with an obstinate student. "We will have to wait till after the Odessa meeting," he said reproachfully, "If you can help us find the shares . . ." He let his voice trail away and I heard, or thought I heard, a scream. It was a shrill, high-pitched sound; a woman or a child in pain.

"What was that?" Elmer asked.

"A bird. Some kind of owl." Beck looked sadly at Elmer. "Pity," he said sadly. "You should never have got involved." He turned to the two youths nearest us. "Search them," he snapped.

"You have no right, sir," Elmer protested.

Beck looked away through the snow patterned windows at the funereal-looking black Land-Rover outside. The youths searched us roughly and thoroughly. They placed our possessions on the desk.

"Watch them," Beck said and went to the door behind the desk.

"You are behaving most improperly, sir," Elmer called after him. He stood up. "I want to call my Consul." One of the youths grabbed his arm and jabbed a revolver in his spine.

"Please sit down," Beck said from the door. "You will be allowed to call your Consul at the proper time."

He left the room and two of the guards stationed themselves in front of each of the doors.

The sun had not yet risen high enough and the morning light was still grey and shaded. I looked at the prints on the walls. They were dark and serious, snow-bound mountain villages at dusk, a portrait of a man who looked like a banker, a stiff-looking bowl of

flowers. I looked questioningly at the guard and lit a cigarette.

A few minutes later we heard footsteps accompanied by a slow steady squeaking, like a ball-bearing in need of grease. The noise seemed to come from the door behind the desk, as if someone was drawing an unlubricated pulley. The footsteps and the squeaking grew louder till they stopped behind the door.

Without knowing I got to my feet. The guards too had stiffened, standing as near to attention as civilians could get, their eyes fixed on the door. Then the door opened and Beck said, "These are the men," speaking over his shoulder, holding the door open to enable the wizened figure in the wheel-chair to creak through.

The man in the wheel-chair was built as lightly as a bird, except for his shoulders which were wide and square and hunched with the overdevelopment of a cripple. His face was thin, the skin stretched closely over the skull, wrinkled. A face like an orang-outang. Deep blue eyes stared out of sunburnt wells in that shell-like face, and the cheeks were emaciated and sunken, like fox holes. He hardly moved as he was wheeled into the room and for a moment I thought I was looking at a corpse.

Then the figure in the wheel-chair spoke, his voice quavering with age, and as he spoke he revealed a set of large shiny teeth, pressed close together and filling his whole mouth, teeth that one would never had imagined existed in such a shrunken head.

"Gentlemen," said the figure in the wheel-chair, "I am Rudolf Steinmeyer."

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Steinmeyer allowed himself to be helped to the chair behind the desk. He had little strength in his legs and could walk only with difficulty. There were two heavy sticks suspended from the back of the wheel-chair.

"At last," he said, and looked at us without expression.

"I liked Heller," he said. His gaze rested on me. "It was you who killed him."

"It was I who brought him out of Berlin."

"You have been a hindrance," Steinmeyer said, "nothing more than that." He leaned forward across the desk. "What happened to the gold?" he asked. "What happened to the Odessa shares?" he went on: "My shares?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't bloody well care."

One of the guards hit me. Not hard, not too soft either, jarring my head, reminding me of my proper situation.

Beck said, "We haven't much time. We should be leaving for the meeting soon."

"Have the car brought round in half an hour," Steinmeyer said and looked back at us. "You don't know where the shares are?"

Neither Elmer nor I said anything.

"Very well," Steinmeyer said and allowed that expressionless gaze to rest on the guard. "Bring in the woman," he said.

* * *

The Marquesa was brought in between two guards, her arms strapped behind her, her thin blouse hanging unbuttoned, its ends dangling like a shirt tail over her torn ski pants. Her hair hung in tousled ugly streaks, damp with sweat and covered with a

powdery brown dust. Her jaw was blue and swollen and a thin trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth. The bridge of her nose had been smashed and one eye was puffed and closed, and coloured a brilliant purple.

The guards flung her on to the chair between Elmer and me and as she fell her blouse swung open. There were angry red circular weals on the mound of her left breast that looked as if they had been made with glowing cigarette ends.

It was then that Elmer decided to be chivalrous. He leapt to his feet crying, "Animals, animals, this is no way . . ."

A guard cuffed him across the face. The sound of the blow reverberated through the room like a pistol shot. Elmer staggered and the guard hit him again just below the ribs. His mouth opened fish-like, gasping for air, the mark of the first blow standing out in dark vivid stripes. His knees buckled and he fell moaning to the floor.

"This," Steinmeyer said, "is the whore Gerhardt Niefeld married. You know each other."

Steinmeyer was looking at me.

"Yes," I said. "We know each other."

A guard yanked Elmer upright and dumped him in the chair. He was breathing painfully and his face had gone very pale, covered with a shiny film of sweat.

"I want you to tell me," Steinmeyer said "where the shares are."

I looked from Elmer to Steinmeyer, from Steinmeyer to the Marquesa. She was lying at an uncomfortable angle across the armchair. Her lips were cut and swollen and her one sound eye met mine then looked away. I might have imagined it but I thought she shook her head.

"We have no idea," I said. "No idea at all."

Steinmeyer looked through me and nodded to the guards. One of the men in shirt-sleeves yanked the Marquesa up and turned her round to face the room, holding her upright against his own body. The other guard came up to her, walking lightly on the balls of his feet. The Marquesa saw him and began to whimper.

The guard hit her. A low vicious jab to the stomach that slammed the breath out of her body. Her captor let her roll forward and the attacker smashed a rifle butt into her already broken face. Her head jerked back with a thick spattering of blood, like rain drops and then the man hit her again flinging her head to one side like a broken marionette.

"Stop," I shouted. "Stop." A guard grabbed my arm and I ducked to avoid the vicious punch that followed. A revolver was jabbed into my back. I went still.

Steinmeyer turned to me and said, "Yes?"

I said slowly, "The certificates are attached to the petrol filler cap of the Marquesa's car."

Steinmeyer's face split in a leering smile. "Thank you," he said.

The Marquesa began to cry with a low sobbing sound.

A guard went outside and returned with the filler cap, the certificates impaled on the wire like ducklings on a spit. Gently Steinmeyer eased them off the wire, spread them out on the desk.

"Odessa is now ours," he breathed softly and smiled again. The oversize teeth seemed to fill the shrunken face till there seemed there was no face left, only skin and bone surrounding a set of gleaming white dentures. He let his glance rove over Elmer and the Marquesa and me. The smile faded. "Take them out and shoot them," Steinmeyer said.

The grip on my wrist tightened, the revolver pressed itself more firmly into my back. A guard dragged Elmer upright and the man holding the Marquesa began to push her roughly towards the door. I realised with a paralysing numbness that I was going to die, and that it was all happening so quickly that I couldn't even protest.

Then the outside door smashed open. Ashraf stood there spattering snow all over the floor. A white balaclava was pulled down over his face and he had a revolver in his hand.

"All right," he said. "Hold everything."

He leant against the door jamb and took in the scene.

"Over here," he said, motioning to Elmer. "Untie her first."

Elmer did as he was told and led the Marquesa to where Ashraf stood.

"Nicholas, are those the papers?"

I nodded.

"Get them."

I went up to one of the guards, unfastened his holster and stuck his gun into my own waistband. Then I went up to Steinmeyer.

Steinmeyer remained motionless behind the desk, his hands laid flat along it, palms facing downward. He was looking at a patch of wall above my head. He remained completely impassive as I took the certificates off the desk.

"Bring them over here," Ashraf demanded.

I did so. Ashraf stuffed the papers into his jacket. "So we're not bloody amateurs after all," he said.

"No," I said.

He grinned at me. "I should kill you for calling the police last night." Suddenly he pointed to the bottom of the hill. "Get out," he said.

"What do you . . ."

"You've got a car at the bottom of the hill. Get out." His eyes were looking past me into the room. They fixed with a frightening intensity on Steinmeyer.

"I thought we were helping each other," I said slowly.

"There are more important things," Ashraf said. "Please go."

I nodded to Elmer who led the Marquesa outside.

"Keep going," Ashraf said. "And don't turn around. I don't need your help."

Looking back on it now, I can't help wishing that he had been less confident.

"Thanks mate," I muttered and stepped out into the snow.

Halfway down the hill the Porsche was parked nose down. Dael was leaning out of the driver's door with the Schmeisser in her hand. She ignored us as we crunched slowly along the snow down the hill to the Capri.

I walked behind a little to the left of Elmer and the Marquesa. The promise of a fine day had not been kept and the sky was heavy, like grey cotton wool, the air was filled with that peculiar translucent light that precedes a snow storm.

I felt the gun tugging at my pocket as I walked. I had no doubt that as soon as we left the executions would begin. I thought of going back and didn't. Steinmeyer would have killed us just as callously. In any case, I decided, it was a separate war.

I kept walking, watching Elmer and the Marquesa, leaving deep boot prints in the snow. My own softer shoes were soaked through, and the snow clung damply to the bottom of my trousers. I decided that we should get the Marquesa to a doctor.

In a way I was glad it was all over. I was lucky to be alive, even luckier to have come out with a small profit. Some of the others hadn't been so fortunate. Like Patrick and the Marquesa. Then I remembered the gold bars in the Alfa, and remembering, turned and stopped.

Elmer stopped too.

"Get going," I snapped, "get her to a doctor. Take the Alfa."

I was looking back at the chalet and what I saw there drove all thought of the gold bars from my head.

"But—"

"Take the Alfa and for Christ's sake, hurry! I'll meet you in Vaduz."

The Land-Rover was drawn up in front of the chalet, the snow lovingly brushed from its high, long body. The chauffeur was making his way to the side of the house, to the outside door where Ashraf stood.

He was a short stocky man, dressed in brown, with shiny leather cap and boots. He also had a shiny leather holster and he was staring at the footprints leading down the hill. He took one look at the Porsche and began to run drawing his revolver as he went.

I began to run too, crouching low against the snow, forcing my legs to hurl me up the steep incline. My legs thrashed at the snow, my feet slipped and sank. I crawled on hands and knees, grabbing desperately at the omnipresent softness. I went forward and up anyhow, snow slipping damply, insidiously up my sleeves and down the front of my open anorak. There was snow on my hair and on my face, and my body was covered with a prickly sweat and still I kept struggling upwards.

The chauffeur was running along the side of the house, his dark figure like a shadow in the all pervading whiteness. I was within ten yards of the Porsche when I heard the Schmeisser crack. The figure stopped in midstride, vibrating like a puppet, fell, rolled over and lay still.

"Good girl," I breathed and then the hut erupted with a staccato crackle of revolver fire. Ashraf's body jerked off the doorstep and slithered helplessly along the snow. Once he curled round and fired wildly. Then the pistol fire picked him out again, colouring his anorak with vivid bursts of red as he rolled and curveted and fell towards the Porsche.

Almost at once the Schmeisser opened up, its heavy bark drowning out the shriller sound of the pistols. I flung myself over the last ten yards and crouched beside Dael and the Porsche. I loosed off two shots in the direction of the house while Dael slammed in another magazine.

"Keep me covered," I said and handed her my gun.

She glanced briefly at me, dry-eyed, then began to fire towards the house. Windows smashed and the bullets whined threaten-

ingly overhead as I dashed across the snow to where Ashraf's body lay spread-eagled.

Ashraf had been hit several times. His blood was already congealing in the snow. A bullet whistled past me smashing the window of the Porsche and I flopped down beside Ashraf's body, trying to use it as a shield. Another bullet ricocheted off the car with a high twanging sound. As soon as Dael's magazine was empty they would be able to take better aim. I reached a hand into Ashraf's anorak and took out the Odessa documents. The Schmeisser stuttered and died and for a wild second I thought they had me. Then Dael opened up with the Winchester and I kicked myself down the slope and rolled round in front of the Porsche.

I opened the door and slipped across into the passenger seat.

"Come on," I said. "I've got the papers."

She rose and fired once more. Then she dived into the car and I whipped off the handbrake. The car began to drift down the slope and she whirred the starter till the engine came to life. From the chalet, rifles started firing. I picked up the Winchester and gave them a burst, as the car gathered speed and we began to slither across the snow to the road.

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DAEL DROVE VICIOUSLY hurling the little car round the corners in harsh, violent skids. The engine shrieked desperately as she kept her foot hard down, twisting the wheel round, powering the car round in angry wheel-spinning slides. Snow banks rushed crazily at us, stones clattered loudly against the chassis floor. We bounced and tossed on the uneven surface like pellets in a tin can. I hung on to the grab handle and prayed as Dael set the car up for yet another corner.

I knew it couldn't last. Sooner or later we would hit a snow bank or plunge through a fence down the side of the mountain. All I could do was hope that it would be later.

A few corners behind us was a Mercedes, perhaps faster and certainly larger. They had one advantage over us. Our guns were empty.

We crunched against a culvert, straightened the spinning car and plunged forward to the cliff edge. Dael braked and swung the car wheel. The car leant over rising nearly on two wheels before it flung its way round the corner with a grating protest of suspension.

We came down fast, the road a scarred snowy ribbon, the trees and the snow banks a wild blur. I felt my stomach curl at the speed and tried to force my mind into blankness. A few more minutes and we would be in the village. The road there would be better and once we got to the main road we would be safe.

Then as if to mock my thoughts of safety, the back of the car whipped round. I was pressed sideways against the door, my head bounced off the sill. There was a loud bang and the car seemed to revolve on itself. The mountains rushed to meet us and there was the harsh skidding grating noise of metal dragged along ice, and

the car pushed its nose into a snow bank. The engine clattered and died.

For a moment we looked at each other and Dael frantically turned the starter. It whirred and clanked.

"It's no use," I said, "we're too deep in the snow."

I pushed the door open and climbed out. It was very silent outside except for the hum of an exhaust some two hundred metres above us.

"Quick," Dael said. "The skis."

She had already taken a pair off the roof-rack and was kneeling by the side of the road. Opposite the snow bank where the Porsche had stopped the mountain fell away in long undulating waves.

"There are boots in the car," Dael said.

I hurried. The boots were too tight but fortunately they were the clip-on type. I put them on and fastened the skis. My legs felt trapped, my feet painful. I didn't want to even think of a long, fast descent across the virgin snow.

"There is a ski trail," Dael said.

"I hope it isn't too steep," I replied. "I'm not very good at this sort of thing."

* * ■

I followed Dael's yellow parka across the slope of the mountain, skis hissing softly, vibrating as they gathered speed. I heard a shot and saw the Mercedes parked by the road edge. Brown clad figures were standing by it and two of them were kneeling down, putting on skis.

Dael had been right. There was a ski trail, a gentle sloping ski trail, that any novice could practise on. I used my sticks to pass Dael and waved her to go faster. She turned and then crouched down, stabbing the snow.

We began travelling quickly, skis slivering over the snow. The wind whipped at our faces, the cold crept through our anoraks. I had no goggles and my eyes began to water.

Dael risked another glance behind. We were doing nearly thirty miles an hour and there were patches of ice on the trail. There were also two men on skis behind us, travelling easily, lightly, crouched low, their sticks prodding up into the sky behind them. Those men, I realised sickly, were expert skiers.

I stabbed at the snow again, trying to force more speed. The

trail was more even now going flat before a gentle curve. My back was aching from the stooped position and I felt my body straighten as the speed diminished.

There was a harsh whine over our heads, and a split second later the ugly crack of a pistol shot. The men were closing up rapidly and soon would be within accurate aiming distance. We had to fight to keep up speed and then I saw what we had to do. I didn't like it but it was either that or certain death. I crouched down and pointed, straight ahead.

Dael nodded, stabbed at the snow, pushing herself faster and faster. We skimmed over the trail, skis singing, sticks working to get the maximum speed. The corner loomed up, its bank curving like the edge of a pudding bowl. I fought my feet straight and pointed the tips of the skis at the edge of the basin and jumped.

There was a moment of brief, free flying silence, when the world seemed to stand still. Then the heavy slap of skis tramping snow. The jerk of the landing nearly made me fall forward, my skis slithered, touched, a great force pulled at my ankle, and then I was travelling forwards at a frightening speed down the side of the mountain.

My skis sizzled over the fresh snow, the wind tore at my face and clothes. I fought to keep the tips of my skis straight and apart and prayed there were no drifts or sudden rocks.

This part of the mountain was unmarked. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Dael, a crouched yellow figure, face screwed tight with cold and fear. The village seemed tiny and very far away as our speed increased, 45, 50, 60 miles an hour.

We were going too fast now to stop by falling sideways, and travelling over fresh snow the only method available was the Christi, the turn you made by jumping out of your ski tracks at right angles. The last time I'd attempted a Christi I'd slid backwards into an Alpine restaurant.

Below us the incline stretched sheer and steep, lined with the pylons of the ski lift. We were heading straight for them and I began to force the tips of my skis a little to the right, starting a long turn.

I dared not look behind for fear that the skis, pounding the snow underneath me, would break and cross. I dared not think about slowing down yet. So I kept working on the turn hoping it was accurate enough to miss the pylons.

My legs were throbbing, like vibrating rubber and my feet felt

as if they were on fire. My face was a solid block of ice and my stomach seemed to have curled itself into a tight ball.

I must have been doing well over 70 miles an hour. I began to think of easing the angle of descent and scrubbing off some speed that way. I didn't know how close our pursuers were.

I leaned over on to my right foot, tightening the turn fractionally as the pylons loomed up, big and solid, their latticework like steel webs. I leant and prayed and watched the hissing tips turn slowly. A flurry of soft snow unbalanced me as I came to the pylon and I felt a ski go. I braced myself for the shock and then I was round brushing the pylon with my shoulder and heading across open snow to the edge.

Below me, I could see Dael skiing quickly, now turning trying to get the skis pointing uphill, then steering round towards the village. The softer snow slowed me momentarily and I turned, looking back across the empty hillside.

I set about stopping a long way from the village, beginning a complex series of traverses. I could see Dael doing the same thing as we dropped lower and lower.

We came down the last slope in a shallow diagonal and stopped on the road with tired flurrying half Christis.

For a moment we stood there panting, legs trembling, feeling drained and spent. Then a man came out of a bar and clapped my shoulder.

"I haven't seen anyone do that in fifteen years," he said.

I leaned against the man's shoulder and unhooked the skis. Then I clumped across to the side of the road and was sick.

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THE MAN TOOK us into the bar and plied us with Pernod.

"It is an honour, believe me it is an honour. Fifteen years I have owned this bar." He thumped the table as if to prove it. "And never have I seen such a thing." He filled our glasses. "Drink. It is an honour."

I pushed the glass away. "We must go. We have a meeting in Vaduz."

The man looked at us in puzzlement. He was a burly barrel-chested fellow, with a contented-looking stomach, and a moustache that drooped like the folded wings of a bird.

"*Merde!* You ski like that for business?"

"Is there a car we could hire? A taxi?"

The man shook his head. "There is no taxi." He picked up his glass and drank. "But I take you. So drink."

We took the bottle with us in the dilapidated Peugeot, veering casually across the road as the man told us how Heinz Spuhling had once acted for him in a land dispute, and what an excellent lawyer the old man had been, and how much better his son was.

"Gentlemen," the man said, thrusting two fingers up at the Fiat he had just carved up, "Real gentlemen."

* * *

Spuhling's office was one side of his home. Part of this had been transformed into a twelve seater boardroom. Elmer was already there, seated before a long table covered with green baize and looking very forlorn and very despondent. He was also very bruised.

"You got here," he cried brightening visibly. "Where's Ashraf?"

"Later," I said. "How's the Marquesa?"

"Not too bad, sir. She'll be in hospital for a few days."

Spuhling came in briskly from his private office, introduced himself and shook hands with the air of a man to whom every second wasted was a second lost.

"It is late, Mr. Maasten," he said. "Late."

He had a good face, strong, sharp featured, with a thin pointed nose, and eyes like molten toffee. "We should have started at noon." He consulted his watch. "Now it is 12.55."

He went quickly to the head of the table and sat down.

"My co-directors will not be attending," he said. "You realise that they are," he smiled, "guinea pigs." He looked directly at me. "Mr. Robey tells me you have documents, giving you control of Odessa Anstalt."

"Not him," Elmer interjected. "Ashraf."

Dael looked out of the window. I passed the certificates across to Spuhling. Spuhling spread the certificates out, and studied them. "You appear to have them all," he said.

"Good," I replied.

"Of course they will have to be authenticated by the bank." He looked at his watch. "They should have been here too. I don't know what's happened to everyone today."

He passed a silver cigarette box round.

"What do you wish to do with the company, Mr. Maasten?" He looked round the table. "Or should I say all of you?"

"Liquidate its assets," I said.

Elmer looked round the table at all of us. "You can't do that," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

He waited till he was sure he had our undivided attention and placed the envelope I had last seen in the Marquesa's Alfa Romeo on the table.

"Do you know what the assets are?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Shares worth ten million pounds."

"You're wrong," he said. "Odessa had only one investment. It is the sole owner of Legermann & Cie. All the shares are held by the bank. That is why I think you'll find that Niefeld was so concerned about the advances to Ramirez. Some of those shares are pledged. If you were to sell them the bank would cease to function." He looked round the table. "It's in the documents the Marquesa took from Rudi Legermann last night."

He smiled at Spuhling. "Under the circumstances, I propose that a Trustee be appointed to protect the only asset of Odessa Anstalt. Any of the big banks will do."

Spuhling asked: "Who will be the beneficiary?"

Elmer kept smiling. "The shareholders of Odessa Anstalt, whoever they might be."

Spuhling stopped writing and looked up. "I have taken notes of this," he said. "I will get it typed and would like all of you to sign it." He looked at his watch again. "I wish someone from the bank would arrive. Before we can do anything we must have the shares authenticated."

As if in answer to his wish there was a sound of footsteps outside, and a tap on the door.

"Ah," Spuhling said, rising. "Excuse me. It must be the person from Legermann."

I helped myself to a cigarette from the silver cigarette box, still trying to figure out how, if I had an entitlement to one fifth of ten million pounds, I could sneak out one million without Carruthers noticing.

Spuhling wrenched the door open briskly and stopped, his mouth hanging open in surprise. The man at the door seemed to be dressed in some kind of uniform. I recognised the brown ski cap, the brown anorak and brown ski pants. I also recognised the vicious looking Luger that he fanned the room with as he pushed Spuhling inside.

"What is the meaning of this?" Spuhling demanded. As far as he was concerned guns were something you did military service with. You didn't point them at people. He made to go forwards, towards the young man.

"Don't," I snapped.

Spuhling stopped, staring angrily at the intruder. "Explain yourself," he demanded, "or I shall call the police."

The man ignored him, waiting by the door till Beck wheeled Steinmeyer in. Beck wheeled him to the head of the table and turned the chair round. Another of the youths came in, and stood by the door, his revolver pointing impartially at everyone in the room.

"Sit down, Spuhling," Steinmeyer said. "Standing tires me." He smiled at the joke.

I stopped thinking of how I could get my hands on one million pounds. If I got out of this one alive, I swore, I'd never worry about one million pounds ever again.

"I see you have my shares," Steinmeyer said. "Let us begin the meeting."

"The shares are Maasten's," Spuhling said. "He brought them to me."

Steinmeyer looked at me. "You should have broken your neck," he said. Then to Spuhling, "He stole them from me. They are mine."

"It is immaterial whether he stole them or not," Spuhling said. "Bearer shares belong absolutely to the possessor. You must know that."

"But they're mine. Mine."

Beck said smoothly. "We want the company's assets liquidated and placed in my name at the Union Bank of Switzerland."

"That resolution has already been discussed," Spuhling said stubbornly. "By the shareholders."

"In that case undiscuss it," Steinmeyer said. "I order you."

"No," Spuhling said.

I leant forward: "Do as he says."

"I still need authentication," Spuhling said. "From the bank."

"No," Steinmeyer rasped. "When I appointed your father he did as he was told. It is a good habit. Now will you do as I say."

"I need authentication," Spuhling repeated grimly.

Steinmeyer motioned to a guard.

"Shoot the girl," he ordered.

The guard took two paces into the room. Dael's face went pale. She closed her eyes and sat up very straight. Silence thick as cotton wool filled the room.

Then the phone rang cracking the tension like a rock falling through ice.

"Hello," Spuhling said, "Hello."

"Yes," His face took on an expression of concern. He pulled a pad near to him and began writing.

"What time?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Well thank you for letting me know."

He put the phone down and he was smiling a little.

"That was an associate in Zürich," he said quietly. "At 11 o'clock this morning, Herr Stofel, the acting president of Legermann & Cie, was found in a Zürich street. He had shot himself through the right temple."

Spuhling looked round with satisfaction, listening to Dael's

stifled gasp, the rustle of movement as everyone leaned forward.

"The Bank of Legermann & Cie," he said, "is unable to pay its creditors. It has closed its doors." He stood up and walked to the phone. "You can put those guns away," he said, "and stop quarrelling over pieces of worthless paper. Odessa has lost its only asset."

Steinmeyer was the first to react. He seemed to crumple, his clothes seeming large and soft like winding sheets. "No!" he cried. "No. No. No. I must talk to Legermann. Get me out of here."

Beck said: "But Herr Legermann is . . ."

"Get me out of here!" Steinmeyer shrieked in a high falsetto. "Get me to Legermann."

39

We had a table by the window at the Café Real. From where we sat we could look down upon the grinding line of snow grimed cars creeping along the street that was Vaduz. The pavements were thronged with people, a bright patchwork of coloured anoraks and gaily bobbing ski caps.

"I can't stand the sight of snow," I said and turned to Dael. "Why don't we go away somewhere? Somewhere really hot, where there is lots of sand and lots of sun?"

"Like Israel?" she asked.

"Yes. Why not?"

She gave me a half smile and looked down at her plate. "You should have simply said 'yes'." Her voice was barely audible.

We ate for a while in silence. At the back of the queue of traffic a red BMW was scurrying like an impatient hound, trying to force its way past an Opel whose roof-rack was piled high with suitcases and whose windscreen was covered with stickers.

"It wasn't very much after all," Elmer remarked. "A few gold bars, some information, a few securities, a bankrupt bank."

"You shouldn't say that." Dael looked at him. There was a curious lifelessness in her glance. "Hasek and Ashraf are dead."

And Patrick and Heller, I thought, and also countless others who had provided the basis for the Odessa fortune.

"I am sorry," I said and took her hand. "Elmer and I are both sorry."

She took her hand away and looked at Elmer. "Thanks to you and the Marquesa we found enough information to smash the whole Odessa network," she said. "That is worth something."

"And the gold in the Marquesa's car?" I asked.

Elmer smiled. "I have arranged for that to be deposited," he said, "in a bank with substantial assets."

"In your name?"

Elmer leaned forward: "No, in hers. The Marquesa must have the gold, sir," he said firmly. "I promised her that."

I smiled across the table at him. "No percentage?" I asked.

"She is a real lady, sir," Elmer said. "No percentage. She gets everything."

And that, I admitted to myself, was that. I hadn't done too badly anyway. With all the pay-offs I'd had, I was a couple of thousand pounds ahead of the game. It was the right time to quit.

The red BMW snarled past the line of traffic and screeched to a stop outside the hotel, bouncing two wheels on the pavement.

Dael turned to me: "And will you return to England?"

"Eventually," I said, "yes." It would be best if I didn't run into Carruthers for some time. "You?"

She was looking past my shoulder at a bushy haired, bearded young man who had just entered the restaurant. He was wearing a green anorak and camouflage brown trousers. That part of his face that was not covered by hair was deeply suntanned. He came towards us with easy, lithe strides, moving with a kind of controlled energy. In a strange way he reminded me of Ashraf.

"This is Joakim," Dael said.

Joakim eyed us coldly. The eyes in that sunburned face were dark and hard.

Dael got to her feet. "I must go now," she said.

I looked up at her. "Where?"

"We are going back to the chalet," she said, "Steinmeyer will be returning there soon."

As she moved behind my chair I heard the fresh magazines for the Schmeisser clinking in her pockets.

"You can't," I said.

"Goodbye, Nicholas."

I got to my feet. "It's crazy," I said. "You'll never get away with it."

She was looking at me, that wild half smile still on her face.

"You can't," I repeated. "It's madness!"

She didn't move.

"The hell with it!" I cried. "I'll come too."

Slowly she shook her head. "No," she said. "This is not your war, Nicholas. We must do this alone."

Still smiling she held out her hand. "Next year," she said, "in Jerusalem." Then with a whispered "*Shalom*" she was gone.

I watched the BMW squirt into the stream of traffic and pull rapidly past the line of cars. I watched it until it was a speck at the end of the main street that was Vaduz. For no good reason that I could think of, there was a bloody awful lump in my throat.

* * *

I let Elmer drive the Capri back to Zürich. The afternoon had turned fine and a glaring winter sun was burning the world a dazzling white. We passed cars scurrying busily towards the mountains, their roof-racks covered with skis like so many arrows.

"What will you do now?" Elmer asked.

"I think I'll go to Morocco for a while," I said. There was a bar owner I knew in Tangier and I'd heard the Moroccan tourist industry was booming. It was time, I thought, that I had some investments outside Great Britain.

"And you?"

"I think I'll go to Spain, sir, for a while."

I picked up the catalogue from the Postal Museum in Vaduz, and flicked through its pages desultorily. It was some time before the significance of Elmer's answer struck me.

"Why no percentage?" I asked.

Elmer started. Then he smiled sheepishly. "I may as well tell you, sir," he said. "Things are getting rather difficult in Switzerland. You know sir, whatever you do, there are always some people who spoil things for you. And recently, there have been too many operators who have abused Swiss neutrality." He sighed. "The Swiss are getting rather touchy about what goes in and out of Switzerland."

"You wouldn't find the Spanish very co-operative," I said.

"I've thought of that," Elmer said. "I understand the Marquesa de Maerez has a large estate and that it is secluded. It is also not far from the coast. In fact I think it is ideally situated. It would be no trouble at all to build a small airstrip. For light planes of course."

"Of course," I said.

I went back to studying the catalogue. It was over twenty years old, filled with black and white reproductions of stamps, set out against a list of prices in Swiss francs. It was a very impressive stamp collection.

The car radio played a catchy Alpine tune, full of gaily puffing piano accordions. The road streamed by in soft sprung smoothness. I turned to the back of the catalogue and stopped. I stared in surprise, then in disbelief and finally in amazement. Then I began to laugh.

"What's wrong, sir?"

"Nothing." I screeched, "Nothing!" The tears streamed from my eyes, my chest ached and I could barely see the receipt or the insurance certificate stapled to the inside cover of the catalogue. The insurance certificate was for one million five hundred thousand Swiss francs and the receipt acknowledged the loan from Marques de Maerez of six uncancelled five centime 'Double Genevas' 1843. There was also a collection of rare airmails. They looked remarkably like the collection that had been auctioned in London a short while ago. I ran down the list quickly. Yes, it was the same collection, the one without the Hawkers.

Elmer moved the car to the side of the road and stopped. "What's wrong, sir?" Elmer asked again.

"Arabella was wrong," I said. "Niefeld did buy the airmails at the auction."

Elmer said: "Sir, who on earth is Arabella?"

It was difficult for me to speak. So I thrust the catalogue at him and pointed. "There," I gasped, "there's the Niefeld fortune."

"In stamps, sir?"

"In bloody stamps."

"I can't understand why, sir."

"Niefeld didn't trust Legermann. Perhaps he didn't even trust banks. So he took out his share of the Odessa money and invested it in stamps."

"And he hid them in a place so obvious that no-one would think of looking for them there."

"It was the safest place in the end," I said.

"Except," Elmer said, "who will get them out now?"

Our eyes met and held. I reached out and squeezed Elmer's shoulder.

"No," I said, "no, old friend. Not yet. They are still on display in the Vaduz Postal Museum."

Elmer smiled and began to drive again.

"Maybe next year, sir," he said dreamily. "With Dael and the Marquesa. In the summer."

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